

A Heart So True?

Fame, Relationality, & Personalized Media Production in  
Pokémon GO

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation broadly asks how content creators are building relationships with their audience that foster continued financial support as well as how content creators are navigating shifting platform ecologies that promote or hinder monetizing their content and relationships. By incorporating a digital ethnographic and case study approach, I ask what are the various relational labor strategies that Pokémon GO influencers and microcelebrities engage in order to create and maintain a financially supportive gaming fanbase across platforms? Concretely, I am concerned with the interaction of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism and how they shape future and current influencer's labor strategies within the Pokémon GO gaming community. As such, my project expands the influential work of Arlie Hochschild, Nancy Baym, and Jan Padios to think through the shift from emotional labor to relational labor when there is a mandate to build profitable friendships with one's audience. Relational labor is the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (Baym, 2018, 19). In her work about Philippines call centers, Jan Padios defines relational labor as "the labor required to positively identify with, signal proximity to, and effectively communicate with others, particularly in ways that meet the demands of capital (2018, 9). Here, relational labor is referring to how the worker (or creators for the sake of this dissertation) interact with their audience or clients rather than being trained by corporations.

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## Chapter One: Introduction



**Figure 1.1:** Bulbasaur, the Seed Pokémon. My very first partner in *Pokémon Blue*.

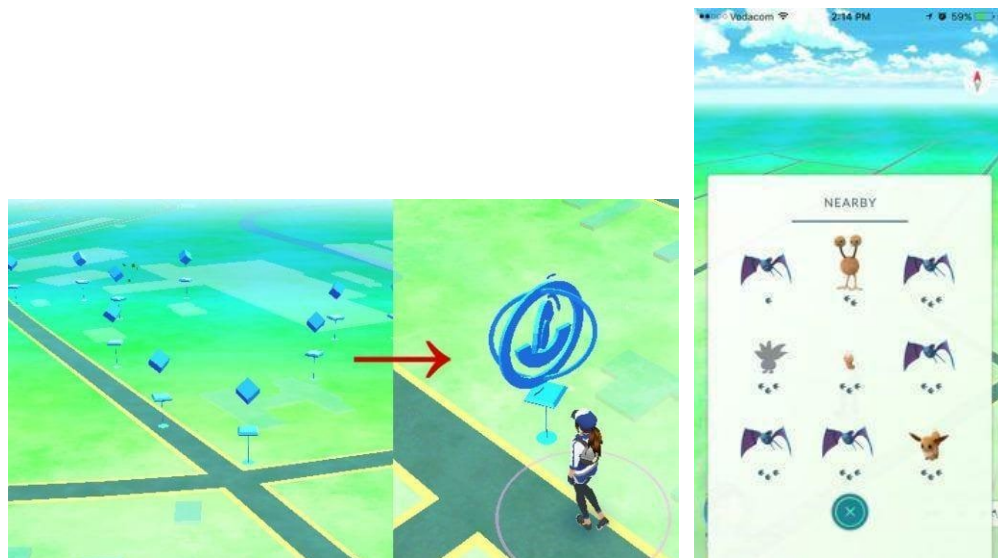
### Origins & Motivations

Sometime in February 1999 and after me nagging them for over a year, my parents sold their wedding bands and bartered Food Stamps benefits in order to buy me a Gameboy Color and a copy of *Pokémon Blue*—the first generation of the Pokémon handheld games. My parents noticed how I did not have many friends and preferred to read books or use the computer from the school’s library or the Brooklyn Public Library. My parents took notice when I hung out after school or played at recess with friends—they were all girls. My parents most likely presumed if I started playing video games that I would be more sociable with boys and perhaps more masculine. The aforesaid sentiment or hope of masculinity for young children assigned male at birth is particularly pervasive and formative when growing up as if only “boys” play video games. As an aside, my parents were not wrong, and I did start playing with boys (mostly toxic ones albeit some

nerdy ones as us queers who play the Pokémon Trading Card Game are scattered far and wide) towards the end of my undergraduate career. Indeed, video games and games writ large has been a formative factor in my queerness and making friends across and outside the gender binary. For me, my foray into video games began with Pokémon and I have now accumulated over 20 years of Pokémon knowledge, interactions, and sentiments.

Like many kids caught up in the Pokémon cultural wave of the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was enticed by the virtual world that seamlessly mirrored the anime. I felt compelled to capture, train, and battle other Pokémon with my very first in-game partner—Bulbasaur (see figure 1.1). As a nine-year-old, being able to collect Pokémon, much like stamps or bugs, venture into the forest or mountains, and using a physical link cable to trade with devices had its own pleasurable social experience pre-social media. As I grew up, Pokémon seemed to “stick” with me; there was this resounding, positive resonance that ephemerally followed me throughout my pre-teen, teen, and adult years. Simply put, Pokémon stuck with me initially because it gave me a surplus of happiness (Ahmed, 2010). I stuck with Pokémon throughout most industry-produced content, like hand-held games and mobile apps, because of the user-generated content; I have seen Pokémon databases like Serebii and competitive simulators and forums like Smogon take flight and populated with its own sub-culture of gamers. As I entered my undergraduate career, I could not seem to shake Pokémon’s catchy new games, flashy cartridges, and holographic cards; I really like shiny things after all. Throughout my three years in college, I held down multiple jobs, tutored folks, or did psychology experiments offered by NYU (some were literally shocking), and I always set aside money to invest into Pokémon console games, trading cards, and fan-produced merchandise. Some folks say

they outgrew Pokémon, yet there is a stickiness that came with Pokémon and, for the general population, the gamification of everyday life via wearables, apps, or sharing for likes on social media (Ahmed, 2008) Ludlow and Wallace, 2007; Taylor, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Humphreys, 2018). Indeed, with the rise in social media use, uploaded or live streamed game walkthroughs called “Let’s Plays” have become very popular, as well as other Pokémon content on YouTube, Pokémon screenshots or augmented reality photos on Instagram. Simultaneously, Pokémon content creators have begun to use digital tip jars or subscription based crowdfunding, like Patreon, for distributing personalized content.



**Figure 1.2A & 1.2B (left to right):** Pokéstops & Pokémon tracker: Pokéstops are used to mark real-world landmarks and collect in-game items. Figure 1.2B is the original Pokémon tracker used in-game to denote how far away a Pokémon was from the player.

On July 6, 2016, Pokémon GO was released. Pokémon GO is an augmented reality mobile game that is free to play. Pokémon are virtual creatures that can be captured, trained, battle other Pokémon, and evolve into new forms. Like most Pokémon games in the franchise, there is a time-consuming component commonly known as

grinding. Although Pokémon GO is free to play, there are paid premiums that make the game progress quicker and reduce grinding time. I downloaded the game late in the night of July 7 and was immediately hooked. I was able to re-capture my first partner Pokémon, Bulbasaur, and proceeded to walk outside at 9:30 pm. I was able to spin a plethora of Pokéstops (figure 1.2A), which carry in-game rewards and give a brief history of the real-world landmark it is attached to—like the Stone Arch Bridge, located in downtown Minneapolis. I found and captured Pokémon related to the environment I was walking through—primarily water-type Pokémon, like Staryu, by the Mississippi River, and ghost-type Pokémon, like Ghastly, by the Mill City Museum Ruins. Pokémon GO was able to do something most games could not—it forced users out of the house to explore and learn their surroundings by walking several kilometers a day. Furthermore, Pokémon GO facilitated face-to-face communication to strategize collaborative gym and boss battles, as well as encouraging gamers to collaborate online. Pokémon GO generated mainstream and local media attention; simultaneously, gaming content creators and digital artists went viral with Pokémon GO gameplay related content during the initial July 2016 wave.

After going viral and gaining traction on other videos or illustrations, some gaming content creators focused their content production on Pokémon GO in order to capitalize on the moment and secure a financially and emotionally supportive audience on specific platforms, such as YouTube. By shifting their focus exclusively to Pokémon GO related content after going viral with a video or illustration, these content creators were able to generate continual conversation and cognitive work among their audience about what type of content to produce next. Ongoing dialogues emerged across social

media platforms where the audience could vote or contribute feedback by liking a comment in YouTube, asking an anonymous question on Tumblr, or donating a monthly fee for exclusive artwork and livestreams via Patreon. Some creators used their newfound fame to create a Patreon for sustained monthly crowdfunding or began livestreaming and accepting one-time donations during streams on YouTube and Twitch. Continuing their fame, content creators would constantly check in on fellow Pokémon GO fans. For YouTubers, this entailed producing a new video multiple times a week (at the height of the game's popularity, this entailed one video a day), holding live chats or live tweeting sessions, and listening to audience feedback of what content or Let's Plays they wanted to see next. For fanartists, this meant playing Pokémon GO and picking up on moments in the game and producing artwork that would invoke nostalgia or queer the franchise. Queering the Pokémon franchise is crucial as the game has a history of being heteronormative and not showcasing queer characters. Both YouTubers and fanartists on tumblr had to listen to their audience but also let their audience in on who they were. In other words, they were not mere content producers, but had to build friendships with their audience in order to gain the potential for financial support. This phenomenon ultimately demarcated a historical transition from emotional labor to relational labor in which content creators, gamers, and influencers on various platforms do not rely on organizational structures such as working hours and one-to-one interactions with consumers like traditional jobs (Baym, 2018). Indeed, this transition to relational labor among content creators for their general audience is crucial to understanding how platform economies function as requiring the creator to be always-on, always emotionally available, and always entrepreneurial. This study explores how Pokémon GO gaming

content creators and digital artists were able to maintain their success through cultivating an emotionally and financially supportive audience base through various relational labor tactics and by navigating shifting platform policies around content production and moderation.

## **Research Questions**

My dissertation research investigates three primary questions throughout each of my empirical chapters. Throughout this dissertation, I ask what are the various relational labor strategies that Pokémon GO influencers and microcelebrities engage in order to create and maintain a financially supportive gaming fanbase across platforms? Concretely, I am concerned with the interaction of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism and how they shape future and current influencer's labor strategies within the Pokémon GO gaming community. As such, my project expands the influential work of Arlie Hochschild, Nancy Baym, and Jan Padios to think through the shift from emotional labor to relational labor when there is a mandate to build profitable friendships with one's audience. Relational labor is the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (Baym, 2018, 19). In her work about Philippines call centers, Jan Padios defines relational labor as "the labor required to positively identify with, signal proximity to, and effectively communicate with others, particularly in ways that meet the demands of capital (2018, 9). Here, relational labor is referring to how the worker (or creators for the sake of this dissertation) interact with their audience or clients rather than being trained by corporations.

First, I examine how Pokémon GO YouTubers and fanartists were able to transform their going viral moment, which meant gaining a lot of views and followers through one video, livestream, or illustration, into a long-lasting audience financial and emotional support on various platforms. I explore the meaning of becoming and failing to become an influencer in chapter three to interrogate the relational labor practices of becoming an influencer within a specific gaming niche on YouTube. I also explore how platform economies demand influencers to be flexible and innovative by being able to transition their audience from one gaming platform to another. In particular, the end of chapter three interrogates this mandate of flexibility and innovation as influencers shifted from uploaded, edited content on YouTube to livestreaming and being unscripted on Twitch. Chapters four and five analyze and shadow one fanartist for over two years to flesh out how their unpaid work on tumblr transformed into a monthly source of income on the subscription-based crowdfunding platform, Patreon. In doing so, this dissertation interrogates how Pokémon GO influencers build relationships with their audience that foster continued financial and emotional support across platforms. This interrogation allows me to focus on the historical transition from affective to relational labor by looking at various Pokémon GO influencers and their specific labor practices on platforms and how they demarcate the shift away from emotional labor practices: Specifically, I ask what are the various relational labor strategies that Pokémon GO influencers engage in order to create and maintain a financially supportive gaming fanbase across platforms?

Second, I explore how creators navigate the shifting structural ecologies of platforms and how these platforms have become embedded in everyday life, venues of

financial support, and modes of content moderation for gaming and livestreaming communities. This has been termed as the “platformization” of culture or the “penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and government frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life” (Poell et al., 2019, 5). For instance, the 2018 adult content ban (also referred to as the NSFW ban) on tumblr orchestrated a mass exodus of users and creators from the platform after the content moderation around female presenting nipples and other human or cartoon pornographic images were removed or blocked from the site. Similarly on YouTube, creators or gamers must have over 1000 subscribers and 4000 hours of overall watch time on their channel within a year in order to monetize their content via ads for uploaded videos or SuperChats (one-time donations) for livestreams (Welch, 2018). In the context of this dissertation, my three empirical chapters focus on platform policies that determine what content qualifies as worthy of monetary compensation as well as what content is deemed too explicit and banned from platforms. Specifically, I ask how are Pokémon GO influencers’ gaming content and interactions with their fanbase affected by the commodification of relational practices by ever shifting platform policies around content creation and moderation?

Finally, I deploy a feminist media studies lens throughout this dissertation to situate and interrogate how neoliberalism and platform capitalism intersects with various social locations like race, gender, and geographical location that affects the ability for one to become an influencer or microcelebrity on a platform. Nick Srnicek argues that when a crisis occurs, capitalism is often restructured under new guises and technologies (2017, 7). In this instance and in conjunction with the rise of neoliberal practices like entrepreneurialism and self-branding on social media, capitalism subsumes platforms as



data mines for new modes of profits and interactions with producers and consumers (Srnicek, 2017). Furthermore, these platforms create working conditions where data and analytics are part and parcel for defining successful creators and practices. In other words, Pokémon GO YouTubers and fanartists often rely on how many people like, comment, and share their content on other platforms, how many subscribers and followers are gained each day, and making the creator responsible for fixing any shortcomings and learning to cater to their audience. This defining trait of the intersection of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism is described through investigating Pokémon GO influencers in chapter three, focusing on how YouTubers collaborate in order to boost one another's views and subscribers. Chapters four and five address this intersection by looking at unpaid artwork and membership-based crowdfunding and how creators become dependent on producing exclusive, personalized products. I am concerned with the interaction of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism and how they shape future and current influencer's labor strategies within the Pokémon GO gaming community. Resonating with my previous research questions, I specifically ask how the intersection of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism via branding, analytics, and personalized media production are interacting with Pokémon GO creators' ability to be successful on platforms?

To address the aforesaid questions, I investigated the Pokémon GO phenomenon by conducting dual digital ethnographic case studies of Pokémon GO YouTubers and a Tumblr fanartist from July 2016 to July 2018 to broadly ask how content creators build and maintain monetized relationships with their audiences. As mentioned earlier, Baym's and Padios's definition of relational labor focuses on labor and affective exchanges

among individuals and their need to appeal for commissions, donations, or subscriptions from their audience or fans rather than individuals purely in traditional hourly paid jobs. Relational labor differs from emotional labor in that social media platforms do not rely on organizational structures such as working hours, mandatory human resources trainings, and one-to-one interactions with consumers like traditional jobs. Indeed, the worker on social media platforms is able to work for themselves and receive income via advertisements, sponsorships from corporations, or one-time or monthly donations from their audience and followers. As such, relational labor depends on the worker learning how to interact with their audience or clients rather than being trained by corporations.

Furthermore, relational labor expands the concept of emotional labor as content creators and gig workers depend on large group and continual interactions that result in the audience giving a one-time donation or committing to a certain subscription-based price per month, which are all part and parcel to the success of platforms and their economies. In other words, platform economies for gamers and fanartists are often donation and subscription-based, which requires a constant need of communication and interactivity with the audience. These donations often grant audience and fans exclusive content like custom emojis and promised responses from the creator, but also support the platform. These donations support the platform because often multiple people will pay five dollars a month to multiple creators, which creates the rhetoric of being so affordable that it requires one to sacrifice a fancy coffee per month, so one can support their favorite gamer, influencer, or other content (Arditi, 2021).

Ultimately, the relational labor that is enacted by gamers and fanartists usually results in these creators becoming financially secure or, in some cases, forming a type of

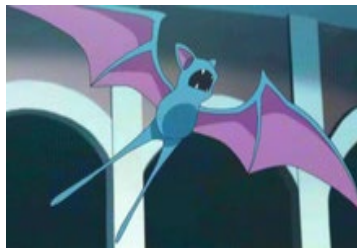
relational bonding—relationships that form such intensely, strong bonds that only a severe reaction or controversy can sever them even without content being produced for the audience. I explore this concept of relational bonding on Patreon in more detail throughout chapter five. This project ultimately lies at the intersection of feminist media studies and game studies and prompts questions of how various forms of attentive, aspirational, and relational labors (Federici, 1998; Read, 2003; Duffy, 2017; Baym, 2018, Abidin, 2019). To be sure, the shift from emotional labor to relational labor is signaled by characteristics of authenticity, celebrityhood, and entrepreneurialism that are also the hallmarks of earning capital under neoliberalism, which is discussed in further detail throughout the literature review section of this introduction. This distinction is important because it aligns with Brooke Erin Duffy (2016), Angela McRobbie (2016), and Elizabeth Wissinger's (2015) understandings of how online worker as they have compellingly argued how creative workers or content producers on social media are often engaged in work they are passionate about, yet that work requires them to live precarious social lives. Before discussing the literature, my next section provides a brief overview of the background and significance of the Pokémon GO phenomenon and highlights some traits of successful Pokémon GO content creators.

## **Background and Significance of Pokémon GO**

Before discussing relevant literature and theories that shaped how I answered my aforesaid research questions, I will dive briefly into the background and significance of doing a digital ethnographic case study on Pokémon GO. I will also briefly highlight influencers that will be discussed throughout chapters three, four, and five. Indeed, as an avid player of *Pokémon GO*, I dealt with a fair share of early game bugs and server

crashes that players and soon-to-be influencers experienced. As someone who played Pokémon GO from the release date until January 2019, I bring inside knowledge of the game and various gamers who created content about Pokémon GO. According to the Pokémon GO gaming community, the most particularly annoying bug upon release was the 3-step tracker to find Pokémon. The game would give you a one, two, or three footsteps notification for certain Pokémon, which signaled how far away they were from you; these footsteps translated to approximately 10, 20, and 30 meters, respectively (Figure 1.2B). However, this feature was disabled for about three months until a new tracker with images was beta-tested in New York City and Los Angeles and then implemented across the globe. During these months, I resorted to Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit to collectively produce live *Pokémon GO* Maps. Fellow fans and players, including myself, would give shoutouts on Facebook groups, use the hashtag #PokemonGO on Twitter, or comment on Reddit forums about where a rare Pokémon was hiding. Some players took this map-making work further and mined the geolocated data from Niantic to provide real-time map streaming of where certain, elusive Pokémon were located, how long they would be there, and their individual statistics so folks did not have to leave their house until they wanted to capture a specific Pokémon. Niantic started to crack down on these “cheating” map services by sending cease and desist letters for third-party mapping activities. Ironically, the GPS mapping allowed players to have more fun, find rarer Pokémon, and provided a more communal aspect while Niantic worked out their game-breaking bug or design flaw. For me, this invoked Tushnet’s and Busse and Gray’s work on the legal limits of what fans can do, particularly for free publicity or unpaid labor, and what corporations prohibit as copyright infringement or intellectual

property theft (Tushnet, 2007; Busse & Gray, 2011). Niantic stopped shutting these services down around September 2016 and resorted to banning players permanently for using third party GPS apps or software on the same device as your *Pokémon GO* account. I stopped using trackers after social media reports of the bans as I did not want to risk my personal account; I was level 30 after all and had nearly a thousand Pokémon, which took months of gameplay. The scholarly side of me kept thinking about the implications of these moves and countermoves for the policing and privacy of digital space, given that Niantic was tracking which apps its players downloaded and launched. These legal and data surveillance measures seemed contradictory when fan-produced content such as mapping services made gameplay easier. However, everyday users, like me, would potentially be banned from playing for a bug or game flaw that existed. As such, I kept thinking about the legality of fan-produced content and what types of fan labor, which is unpaid, receive punishment or violates copyright, and which are rewarded or branded as being entrepreneurial. It seemed odd that Niantic would reward some forms 3<sup>rd</sup> party use, particularly YouTubers until realizing that later on those folks, like Mystic7 or TrnrTips would be sponsored by Niantic for Pokémon GO Fest in Chicago, Illinois, and other Pokémon GO related campaigns.



**Figure 1.3A, 1.3B, 1.3C (left to right):** Pidgey, Zubat, and Rattata shown here, respectively. These are the most found first-generation Pokémon in Pokémon GO when it was first released in July 2016.

With a constantly looming ban for using mapping services to find Pokémon, I was on the verge of quitting because all I caught were Pidgeys, Zubats, and Rattatas (see figures 1.3A, 1.3B, 1.3C), the most common Pokémon in the game. During this time, I found several YouTubers (hereafter and interchangeably, PokéTubers), who uploaded recorded content of them capturing Pokémon or still finding rare Pokémon without the help of live-stream mapping services. When the new tracker system was finally implemented outside of NYC and LA, some real-time maps remained to inform players of the individual statistics and movepool of the Pokémon. However, this new tracker was released in November, which is a time when Minneapolis was experiencing snow and temperatures below 30 F (-2C). Thus, I kept watching Mystic7 and PkmmMasterHolly videos from months prior, also commenting on the videos and chatting with other users.

Mystic7 was the first YouTuber I stumbled across. Mystic7, also known as Brandon, had never played Pokémon before the release of Pokémon GO. Brandon began his YouTube career at 17 years-old in 2014 with his video being the popular mobile and iPad game, *Clash of Clans*, which was a tower defense style game. Brandon has lived in various parts of California throughout this YouTube career and on his Discord server and Twitter identifies as a white, cisgender man who strongly dislikes Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. As of January 2021, Mystic7 has a net worth of 1.5million dollars, which was mostly produced through Pokémon GO YouTube videos and sponsorships from Niantic (Julian, 2021). It is imperative to note that Brandon already had 300,000 subscribers from his previous gaming endeavors before Pokémon GO was released. As such, Brandon can be classified as an influencer because he was already making most of his income via YouTube and through their advertising program. In his first Pokémon GO

video, he showed viewers how to catch a Pikachu using an Easter egg (an in game occurrence that references an older narrative in the franchise) and learned what Pokéstops, Gyms, Teams, and the tracker system were with the help of friends. Mystic7 videos were extremely popular. His personality was a bit imbued with toxic masculinity and arrogance, but being someone who seemed quite engaged with his audience, I was hooked to his content and commentary. I kept watching his videos and found the help that he provided by telling us how to use the new tracker system and which buddy Pokémon were the best for your daily walk or commute enticing. In May 2018, on his way to Italy for a convention, Mystic7 collapsed at the airport from dehydration. he posted on Instagram and Twitter about being dehydrated and apologized for not being able to make it to Italy (Figure 1.4). Fans came to his support and told him to take it easy and not to fret about missing a Pokémon community gathering; however, as a burgeoning influencer, he was still adamant about keeping folks updated and checking in on his community. Shortly after the incident, Mystic7 created another Discord server in addition to Mystic7 server: We The Community. We The Community is a Discord server that was meant to provide resources to mental health and share experiences with one another, Pokémon GO related or not. In other words, both Discord servers were meant to serve as mediums for fans to reach out to him or one of his volunteer moderators so he could personally converse with us. Discord is a Voice over IP (VoIP), instant messaging, and casual streaming platform for gamers to interact with one another. In recent years, Discord has expanded beyond its original audience of gamers and is used by teachers, non-profit corporate employers, and study groups.



**Figure 1.4:** A tweet from May 2018 where Mystic7 tells his audience he was dehydrated and unable to make it to Italy to film Pokémon captures and local attractions.

How does neoliberal rhetoric seep into our everyday life and alters our understanding of mental health? Mystic7 built a close bond with his audience by allowing them into a Discord server to interact with him in private and about his personal life after a health emergency. Yet this was to further his cultural capital and status as an influencer. Even in times of medical crisis, he continued to update his audience on his content production. Throughout this research, Mystic7 became one of the key influencers I followed. I continued to follow and watch his YouTube videos in order to describe the forms of labor he performed in order to maintain a fan base and income.

I first found PkmmMasterHolly (Holly) on Twitter and Instagram with captivating Augmented Reality (AR) photos. Her Instagram linked to her YouTube channel in which I began watching her videos that would often explore the streets of Philadelphia and meetup with various local gamers at Rittenhouse Square. PkmmMasterHolly or Holly



Patterson is a white, 30-year-old, ex-military gamer and content producer who was based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania before moving to Las Vegas, Nevada in 2018. She is also one of two self-identified women who became popular in Pokémon GO gaming communities. Unlike other YouTubers, Holly started her career on Instagram and Twitter before making a gaming channel on YouTube and eventually moving to Twitch in late 2018 to live stream and OnlyFans in 2020 for adult content. Holly was not an influencer or someone who had a large following on her other platforms before her Pokémon GO career. Holly would always post on Twitter to let her fans know that a new video was posted and would start her videos with “Hello, Pokémon Trainers.” Most of Holly’s videos were recorded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and would focus on community battling in Pokémon Gym raids (an hour-long event that required 3-5 people to take down a powerful Pokémon to capture it) and playing with other local players. She was one of the first PokéTubers to be candid about her personal mental health and post on Twitter that she would be taking days away from content to focus on her well-being, in March 2020. Many fans and viewers commented on this video in support. Discussing one’s mental health can be a thorny topic; in theory, it lets the audience see the real, vulnerable content creator. However, it also makes one vulnerable to critique or accusations about how the channel is not for personal matters related to one’s identity (Abidin, 2017). One of Holly’s most popular videos is in March 2020, titled “[emotional] My story & how Pokémon saved me.” Holly encapsulates what nearly four years of Pokémon GO has helped her accomplish. She begins the video in what she described as her most “pure form” without makeup, she then explains how the video is not monetized, and how much work she puts into her self-esteem and crafting her image before uploading or live

streaming. In Figure 1.5, Holly sits in front of her camera on the verge of tears holding a shiny Dragonair plushie and tells her audience how she used Pokémon GO to get out of her comfort zone and her depression. She explains how her depression, anxiety, and suicide attempt really impacted her ability to live her everyday life. She gives a content warning and then details a 2015 suicide attempt to her audience. Holly mentions that she began therapy in 2015. Regarding Pokémon GO's release in 2016, she candidly says,

that if you have social anxiety, depression, all these disorders, or anything on the spectrum of autism, [Pokétubing] can help you the same way it has helped me. It has pulled me out of my shell...I always wanted to be a YouTuber since I was in high school and I did not know what I wanted to make my channel about and I am in school studying to be a therapist. I can relate to people better than I have ever had and it is a tool to communicate with other people.



**Figure 1.5:** Holly in a March 2020 video fully disclosing her mental health struggles and suicide attempt from 2015 and how Pokémon GO content helped her heal.

Holly uses this video to show herself as vulnerable and to connect to her audience as she knows that some Pokémon GO followers and subscribers might have some type of anxiety, depression, or simply lack confidence. Her testimony is honest. Yet it still

revolves around making herself authentic to her viewers so they can relate to her outside of her videos, live streams, or other ancillary content. This authenticity is to remove the transactional aspect from videos. In other words, when audiences perceive content too transactional or for-views only there is a potential for the creator to lose their authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Although Holly is able to be perceived as authentic in a candid video, most of her other videos are monetized. This alludes that realness or authenticity on platforms for content creators can only be produced within a “direct relation to the commodification of culture and the reification of social identities” (Gary and Johnson, 2013, 10). Furthermore, her video struck a chord with other influencers who commented on how brave Holly was and explained that they too faced mental health challenges. This authenticity and braveness reify the notion that in order to be successful within social media work and platform economies one must embrace and endure the precarious working conditions. Precarity here refers to not being able to relate to one’s audience *and* being perceived as too transactional or fake. Indeed, platforms allowed creators to use sites like YouTube to earn income by doing what they love; platforms, of course, charge a certain percentage from each video or corporate sponsorship a creator engages in, which is part and parcel of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017). Ultimately, Holly must confide her most inner thoughts and personal challenges with their audience to solidify a strong relational connection, essentially neoliberal and platform capitalism creating the conditions of a ‘crisis state’ or working under precarity (Gill and Pratt, 2008)

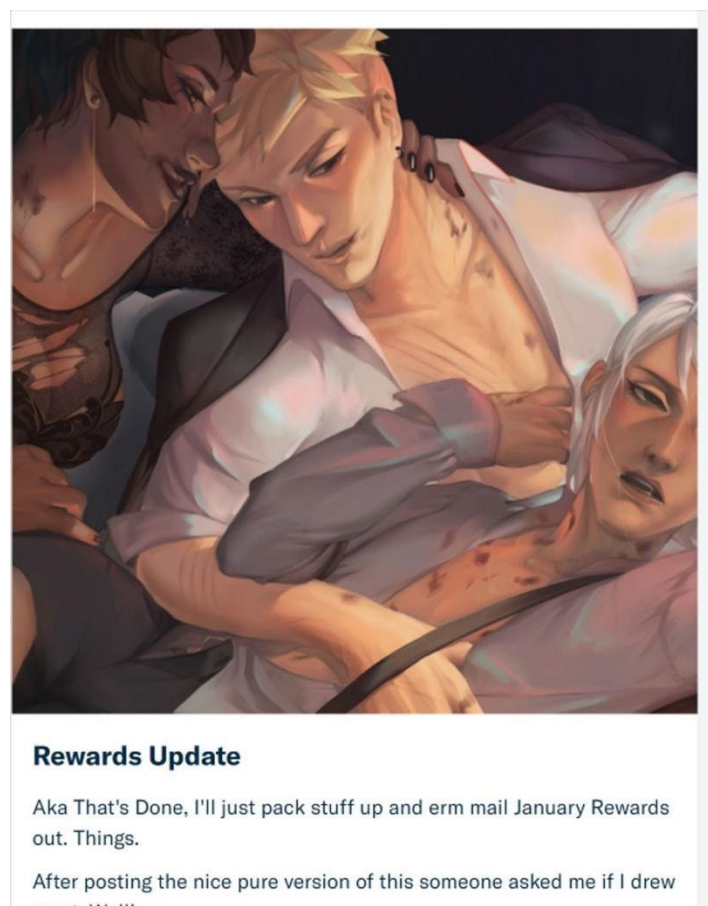


**Figure 1.6:** An image from a The Mary Sue article summarizing how the Trans community on tumblr ultimately decided on picking a team leader who represented them.

Unlike the YouTube videos, the fanart I consumed was outside the Let's Play realm and was more queer and gender fluid focused. As someone who grew up heavily on the tumblr platform, I understood fanart about Pokémon GO would appear and this is how I stumbled upon Surfaceage's work and how they would become the fanartist I shadowed throughout this project. One night in late July 2016, while I was mindlessly scrolling through Tumblr looking for fanart and porn, when I saw posts about the Pokémon GO leaders being nonbinary or gay. In Pokémon GO, the leaders represented a particular color and Pokémon logo that a player can select at level five. Joining one of these teams were necessary to take part in in-game gym and raid battles and receive specific team rewards. However, the in-game roles of the Pokémon GO Leaders themselves were defunct until mid-2018 when they started to assess the individual stats and viability of a player's Pokémon. In figure 1.6, a fanartist drew Candela (left), the leader of Team Valor, Blanche (middle), the leader of Team Mystic, and Spark (right), the leader of Team Instinct. Additionally, in figure 1.6, Jes Grobman of TheMarySue

summarized the trans and non-binary community's consensus on the Pokémon GO Team Leaders and their various identities, essentially queering the leaders. The Pokémon GO team leaders are important here because they are figures of power and authority for their respective team's color, but when they were first released, they did not have a purpose or background story (commonly known as lore) in the game. Fans took to the Internet and began posting theories about each Pokémon GO Team Leader and questions about their gender and sexual orientations arose. After I saw this image, I came across Surfacage's (*hereafter, Surfi*) tumblr page. I noticed their post with the three Pokémon GO Team Leaders, Candela, Blanche, and Spark. Outside the queer networks of tumblr, the general Pokémon GO community was certain that Candela was a woman and Spark was a man; however, Blanche's gender was continually up for debate. In their first Pokémon GO post, Surfi has the leader of Team Mystic, Blanche, respond to the time-old question in Pokémon, "Are you a Boy or a Girl?" Blanche's response is "I'm perfect," essentially refusing to confirm a choice, which many Pokémon game professors force the player to do before continuing the game. In traditional Pokémon games from 2000 until the release of Pokémon GO in 2016, players would select if they were a "Boy" or a "Girl" when asked by the Professor in the game. Gender in Pokémon GO was embodied still within a masculine and feminine presenting avatar, but when you first begin the game, the Professor asks which style or avatar is more like you instead of reducing to Boy or Girl. This post not only made me chuckle but as someone who identifies as non-binary and uses they pronouns, I felt represented by a powerful in-game figure. As cliché as it sounds, having representation in a game that has stuck with me for life just felt heart-warming. I started to follow Surfi and their Pokémon GO artwork. In November 2016, I

started to support Surfi on their Patreon as a Level 3 (\$10 a month) Patron, because they kept producing comics and I enjoyed seeing non-binary, queer, disabled, and diverse characters; moreover, I enjoyed the personalized, tiered rewards that came with each month. As figure 1.7 shows, rewards would include desktop and mobile wallpapers, process videos, and detailed descriptions of how to draw specific elements, like backgrounds or environments. My dissertation is not solely about queer content production and audience reactions, but more about how Surfi was able to create an intimate space for this initially unpaid labor and turn it into paid labor via crowdfunding, which is explored more in chapter five.



*Figure 1.7:* An example of a wallpaper reward from Surfi’s exclusive Patreon.

At the time, I did not realize that my thinking about the policing of digital space and my consumption of Pokémon GO walkthroughs, community meetups, and fanart would serve as the genesis of this dissertation. I kept logs and analytical memos of YouTubers and one tumblr artist but shifted my focus to think about relationality, labor demands, and platform economies of social media work in December 2016 and Internet fame, microcelebrity, and influencers in October 2017 after a conference in Turku and seeing Crystal Abidin explain her research on South East Asian influencers. I started to think about how content creators on YouTube and the one fanartist, Surfi, on tumblr were creating and building relationships with their audience or fans. Furthermore, I started thinking about how creators were garnering an audience and building their brand and fame for sustained income. Although Pokémon GO was extremely popular in 2016, the phenomenon eventually waned from a stampede of folks going after Vaporeon in Central Park (Dennis450D, 2016) to smaller in-person gatherings for raids and in-game collaboration. Currently, at the time of writing, the covid-19 pandemic has reinvigorated the Pokémon GO phenomenon by incorporating stay-at-home raids and in-game rewards for adding new friends (Niantic Labs, 2020) in conjunction with folks using Discord, colloquially known as Slack for gamers, to voice chat virtually and collaborate on in-game events. However, fans still follow and support PokéTubers like PkmnMasterHolly, Mystic7, TrainerTips, Reversal, and ZoeTwoDots, to name a few, as well as tumblr fanartist Surfage. The resounding question for me became: how do the relationships between creator and audience become strong enough to maintain and materialize financial and emotional support after the initial virality of a cultural phenomenon wanes? My research questions about the commodification of relational practices by shifting

platform policies around content creation and moderation dive deeper into the everyday life and work engaged by the Pokémon GO creators in this study. I specifically think how neoliberal ideologies around entrepreneurialism and branding alongside platform capitalism and its precarious income structures impact the Pokémon GO creators. My next section will unpack the various literature and theoretical frameworks that ground this dissertation research and its analysis.

Before moving on, it is imperative to note that Mystic7 and PkmmnMasterHolly become sponsored by Niantic, whereas Surfi does not. Much like how the YouTubers who used GPS mapping were not banned, they received contracts from Niantic to earn additional money as brand and cultural ambassadors for the game. They would wind up creating content for Niantic about various ongoing and future events players could expect. Surfi, much like the players who were banned for Pokémon GO exploits, would not be compensated or sponsored by Niantic. Surfi's ideas, giving personalities to the gym leaders, and creating new, original characters with the help of their community would be exploited in official artwork by Niantic. For the one-year anniversary of Pokémon GO, Pokémon used artwork that depicted Blanche as studious, Spark as clumsy, and Candela as confident. These were specific traits that Surfi and their community developed over the year. Although there is no way to prove that Niantic drew from Surfi's interpretation of the gym leaders, fans were quick to point out how these leaders mimicked qualities that Surfi has drawn. Again, the resounding notion here is how corporations extract labors from creators on platforms who were earning revenue compared to those who were not or could not earn additional income. This leads to literature review and theoretical significance of thinking through the various relational



labor strategies, neoliberal logics, and platform economies that are part of a creator's working day.

## **Literature Review & Theoretical Significance**

In lieu of a traditional literature review chapter, I foreground a literature review with the theoretical significance of my work in the following four sections that bind my three empirical chapters together. Each of these empirical chapters will outline their own specific methods as well as additional contextualization to set up each case study, which is described further in chapter two. The following four sections showcases scholarship, praxis, methodological innovation, and theory in conjunction with platform economies and relational labor of Pokémon GO phenomenon, which is a common thread throughout the entire dissertation.

This literature review will argue for the importance of the transition from affective to relational labor for gaming and streaming communities and influencers on social media, which is essential throughout each chapter as a foregrounding concept of how content creators work on platforms. Throughout this introduction, I use the terms gamers, influencers, and content creators interchangeably unless otherwise noted. Throughout my empirical chapters (chapters three, four, and five), I note when I am making distinctions between these terms. I do this as all the Pokémon GO creators I observed did not start out as influencers or brand ambassador for Niantic or The Pokémon Company International. Instead, all the Pokémon GO creators had to build up a following, create personalized content, and earn the chance to collaborate with Niantic. I will then briefly discuss how content creators work under cultural economies of neoliberalism and how neoliberal policies of the self are extolled on the body and mind

for profit. The following section dives deeper into neoliberalism by exploring the real subsumption of labor on digital platforms, the promise of gig work or freelancing, and the logic of everchanging platforms. Finally, I end the literature review by locating game studies and platform studies scholarship in relation to the Pokémon franchise to show how social media positions creators to become flexible workers who can migrate to a new digital platform at any moment.

### **Affective to Relational Labor**

I bring a short mention of the history of affective and emotional labor to demonstrate the historical shift to relational labor. For the sake of this dissertation, I do not see a stark difference between affective and emotional labor, especially as I am concerned with the transition to relational labor that occurs by content creators and influencers on platforms. This is not to invalidate scholarship that denotes a difference between affective and emotional labor; however, my intervention is on the various working conditions and strategies that platforms create to make relational labor the standard for creators who are ultimately self-employed and without traditional benefits like healthcare or retirement.

Critical theory has often conceptualized affective and immaterial labor as part of abstract, non-paid forms of labor. For instance, philosopher Michael Hardt defines affective labor as “the creation and manipulation of affects,” which can include and is one of many parts to immaterial labor (Hardt, 1999, 96). Immaterial labor encapsulates the production of non-paid or abstract work such as emotions, care work, or knowledge production (Hardt, 1999, 94). Affective labor is not outside of the economic process and is a product of capital in the current economy (Hardt, 1999, 90). Here, affective labor is

used to understand forms of work that are time and emotionally consuming, yet do not result in any direct forms of monetary compensation. In other words, it is the invisible or obscure forms of labor that might occur. Within gig work, a shopper who works with Amazon Fresh or Instacart is paid to shop for a consumer. Obviously, the shopping for a consumer is work. The immaterial and affective part is the ability to take time to shop, picking an alternate product if the one desired is out of stock, carefully inspecting for damaged food or products. Most of the time, this invisible labor can be paid through tips if the consumer is extremely pleased with the service. This can be expanded further by who is often the shopper (Black or migrant worker) and who is often the consumer (middle to upper class or white). Although historically accurate, I disagree with Hardt's notion that immaterial and affective labor are the dominant forms of labor within current platform economies. Current platform economies expand beyond immaterial, affective, or emotional labor as the invisible or largely unseen work is now transformed into building friendships (Baym, 2018).

Feminist scholar Arlie R. Hochschild has theorized the expanding role of affective or emotional labor in everyday life, like talk show hosts, flight attendants, and, most recently, debt collectors. In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Arlie R. Hochschild's watershed work examined how emotional or affective work occurs in both the public and private spheres by analyzing flight attendants and bill collectors. "Working with affect" can be physically and mentally exhausting like a factory or manual work (1983). When Hochschild coined the term "emotional labor" she did not perceive household work as being required to manage one's own emotions for that profession. Indeed, often times household work was part of the non-monetary economy

that was relegated to women and created a stark gender division of labor. However, without household work or women's work there would be no factory or assembly line. When Hochschild coined emotional work she defined it as "emotion management and life management combined. It is the unpaid, invisible work we do to keep those around us comfortable and happy" (Beck, 2018). The rise in content creators, like YouTube influencers, highlight laborers who are doing "passionate work" as identified by Angela McRobbie (2015). In other words, content is not merely produced for visibility but is a signpost of carving out a niche and a passionate job for oneself to fall within the pillars of happiness that neoliberal capitalism requires, which will be discussed in my next section.

Hochschild's provocation of working with affect meant a type of conjuring of emotions and commodification of intimate life for particular social interactions, like flight attendants or debt collectors (Hochschild, 1983), but seems to fall short of capturing the type of labor conducted by content creators and audiences across social media platforms. Social media complicates this by requiring constant interaction with a returning and new audience as well as being self-employed. Additionally, there is an expectation of a type of loose friendship for creators on platforms with their audience. This friendship is seldomly expected in traditional jobs that Hochschild discusses, but is expected among content creators. To be clear, I end with Hochschild's work here to emphasize how affective labor has been transformed in current academic discourses into a category that might not be fully helpful for this project. In other words, Hochschild and Hardt's conception of emotional or affective labor are not adequate here because they do not necessarily account for the combination of self-employed, no social safety nets like healthcare, and the need to extend beyond the working day that occurs on social media

platforms. Of course, I am not dismissing the fact that other content creators are engaging in forms affective or emotional types of labor. However, this project intends to think about the emerging political aspects of affect/emotions in relation to personalized media production and platform economies occurring in the Pokémon GO fandom and across platforms. As such, it is imperative to think about, particularly what Nancy Baym has called, relational labor (Baym 2017, 2018). Baym signposts that relational labor is distinct in many ways, but particularly for her how musicians use social media and engage with work. Musicians will often reach out via Twitter to let their fans know not only about their next gig performance, but the intimate details of their personal life such as breakfast, romantic dates, and well-being. Indeed, relational labor is distinct from emotional or affective labor because creators do not have an organizational structure such as working hours or human resources training.

For Baym, relational labor is the *ongoing* and *interactive* affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating and developing intimate relationships with people over time in order to create structures that can support continued work (Baym 2015, 2017, 2018). This “connective” element of relational labor seemingly draws from gendered forms of unpaid, reproductive labor that women and queer folks are socialized to develop as life skills, like listening attentively to others, being talkative and emotional, and being genuinely concerned (Hair, 2021; Gray, 2020; Baym, 2015; Bolton, 2009; Fortunati, 2007; Gregg, 2011; Weeks, 2007). Furthermore, Nancy Baym argues that musicians are not only managing relationships with individuals, but with crowds or large audiences with who they have relationships or have the potential to form financially sustaining relationships (2018). Jan Padios also uses the term relational labor to research Filipino

call center agents. Padios examines how global labor processes interconnect with localized identities and to see “how relatability in general, and Filipino/American relatability in particular, are activated and harnessed in transnational call center work” (Padios, 2018, 58). For Padios, relationality in the digital and global labor market has a colonial resonance that sticks with the worker who is expected to project kindness and build a rapport with the consumer.

Relational labor is also future-oriented and coded with aspirational business models. Resonating with Brooke Erin Duffy’s concept of aspirational labor (2017), creators are always cognitively thinking about their next deliverable or sponsorship. Indeed, creators have to possess an aspirational narrative of future thinking about work and attempting to gain recognition by corporate sponsors (Duffy, 2017). Duffy’s concept of aspirational labor is deeply intertwined with relationality or relational labor. I use relational labor throughout this dissertation rather than aspirational labor, however, because being future-oriented is only part of the puzzle to being a successful and lucrative content creator on platforms. Furthermore, Pokémon GO content creators are expected to be authentic yet relational. Authenticity that is obviously “fake” the risk of not gaining a large number of followers, especially within gaming or livestreaming cultures (Bulut, 2020). Thus, a performed “realness” can facilitate building relationality with one’s audience and showcasing how a creator is producing content with fans in mind.

Although most Pokémon GO content producers are presumably white cisgender men, they are cashing in on traditionally unpaid forms of feminized, reproductive labor that was essential to the traditional economy. In other words, there is a shift where social

media asserts that this type of labor is essential to developing authentic relationships with your fans or audience as well as monetizing one's own brand. This shift in labor on platforms is important to think of in conjunction with the economic and cultural doctrines of neoliberalism. For instance, Guillaume Dumont analyzes professional rock climbing and how folks use their Facebook pages. Dumont emphasizes that professional rock climbers engage with their fans by posting every part of their trip; for instance, one rock climber one update their fans of their three-month trip via direct messages (Dumont, 2016). Indeed, there is a type of intimacy that is built when a creator on a social media platform responds in a private manner to their fans. A feeling of closeness is ultimately developed; this is solidified across various platforms and how audiences will aid creators in gaming a platform's algorithm. When creators and fans form close bonds, fans on YouTube will reach out and often aid in amplifying a creator's visibility on the platform by suggesting and gossiping about hashtag placement and what content to produce next (Bishop, 2019). This algorithmic gossip and amplification of visibility is a direct product of relational labor strategies deployed by the creator. Creators are now expected to be consistently engaged and reach out personally to their audience. As a result, audience members will then, regardless of the platform, engage in the unpaid work of ensuring their creator gains traction via becoming more visible on a platform.

In one of the few studies on the crowdfunding platform Patreon, media studies scholar Lee Hair thinks through the parasocial relational work and intimacy that occurs (2021). Expanding on Nancy Baym's notion of relational labor, Hair's study demonstrates how digital artists pair relational strategies such as self-disclosure and real-time interactions via live streaming in order to secure financial support. Hair's revelation

demonstrates that creators are expected to treat their most loyal fans as friends. I explore this level of reciprocity in chapter five by exploring when relational labor strategies form relational bonds, which entail deep friendships and connections that deliverables no longer matter to the audience.

## **Economic & Cultural Doctrines of Neoliberalism**

This section will discuss the various economic and cultural doctrines of neoliberalism in order to demonstrate how neoliberal rhetoric and logics of entrepreneurialism are a driving labor force for content creators. On September 11, 1973, the United States supported a coup d'état to overthrow the left-wing presidency of Salvador Allende (Kornbluh, 1998). This coup d'état ushered what conservative economists called for a returning to classical forms of liberalism and discarding Keynesian economic logics. Core tenets of this “new” and revived liberalism perceived the market as allowing people to pursue all their interests and achieve unbounded human development (Hayek, 1944). As Friedman suggests, there needed to be a return to Lockean forms of the individual as the sole unit of analysis and that no group or class, including the government, should be more important than the individual and their immediate family (Locke, 1689; Friedman, 1962). Here, individuals are seen as making efficient, all-knowing, and voluntary market choices that will benefit them and their immediate family (Friedman, 1962). Friedman’s belief in the individual as the most important unit of analysis had him advocate policies of reducing social security, governmental social safety nets in favor of private donations or charity work, and getting rid of public goods by providing private alternatives such as the post office (Friedman, 1962). As grandfathers of this return to Lockean liberalism, Hayek and Friedman’s ideas



paved the way for what critical left scholarship would call the advent of neoliberal politics on a global scale in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the aforesaid 1973 coup ‘d’état in Chile as the first global neoliberal experiment (Duggan, 2003; Harvey, 2005). As of 2020, it is quite evident that markets have been heavily de-regulated, social safety nets like healthcare are being gutted, and the idea of a common good or community is being replaced by the self-sufficient and resilient individual.

Critical left scholarship has focused on neoliberalism as both an economic, carceral, and cultural doctrines that are dependent on states of precarity and labor extraction. Drawing from Foucault’s concept of power as capillaries that flow in myriad directions (1975), Duggan argues that the “neo” in neoliberal discourse is an emphasis on a type of “nonpolitics” or neutrality (Duggan, 2003, 10). This type of nonpolitics is meant to disavow social and economic inequalities as merely individual shortcomings of people being lazy or undeserving and conceal the state’s effort of supporting corporate profit-making by decentralizing and deregulating labor (Duggan, 2003; Hong, 2015; Joseph, 2014). Essentially, neoliberalism serves as a “crisis state” (Gill & Pratt, 2008) that supports rugged individualism and the myth of meritocracy, while cutting social expenditures and safety nets, like education and healthcare, and extending labor beyond the 9-to-5 workplace (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Marwick, 2013, 2015; Joseph, 2014; Spade, 2011). The crisis state of neoliberalism also decimates organized, factory labor in favor of what Negri terms the “factory without walls” (Negri, 1989), in which all of society, particularly through technological shifts, is placed at the point of being mined for value and profit (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt, 2005; Read, 2003; Clough, 2008). The factory

without walls is crucial in the shift to social media content production and platform economies that depend on mining affect, relationships, and authenticity for value.

How then can neoliberalism as an economic, cultural, and carceral project be understood in subjective levels, particularly in relation to content creators, new realms of digital labor, and fame occurring on platforms? Nieborg and Poell (2018) assert that platforms and gig work or self-employed organizations maintain a stronghold around their workers to reduce frictions. For instance, ride-sharing, which is known as Uber or Lyft in most countries, allows the consumer to simply order a ride and potentially share a ride with multiple people and reduce their cost. Workers for ride-sharing companies get to set their own hours, but are capped at a certain number of hours for safety reasons that are alluded to by the corporation. However, ride-sharing corporations like Uber and Lyft engage their employees as self-employed and disavow any accountability or social responsibility as with traditional employment. During ride-sharing, the driver is meant to engage the consumer (rider) in conversation or understand if the consumer wants quiet. This mirrors similar expectations that Pokémon GO content creators had to cognitively think through on various platforms.

This crisis state also demands workers, as seen with Mystic7, Holly, and Surfi, to essentially work to their breaking points. Furthermore, the “factory without walls” seeps into their everyday life where creators are thinking about how to mine and profit from every potential interaction with their audience. In the 1990s and 2000s, fan studies began this research with the Henry Jenkins paradigm of audience and fandom convergence and participatory culture as part of a democratic and celebratory approach (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2006; Bruns, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2015). As Axel Bruns (2008) and Henry

Jenkins et al. (2006) argue, participatory culture predates the internet and social media platforms. Fan produced works and fanfiction were often brought to conventions or other in-person events and then fans would then exchange zines, gossip, or ideas with one another (Black, 2008). Indeed, fanfiction communities were one of the first to showcase how fans can be active producers of ancillary content and proactively change the narrative, particularly to include same-sex or queer relationships.

Although extremely insightful and groundbreaking in communications studies, the celebratory approach to fandom and civic engagement taken by Jenkins has its limits, especially when interrogating the racialized, gendered, and various class privileges associated with fandom, content creators, and audiences' lived experiences. As such, I align with scholars who have thought about the effects and affects of racialized and gendered aspects of fandoms (Pande, 2016; Stein, 2015) as well as through neoliberal logics of entrepreneurship, affect, and immaterial labor (Booth, 2015; Driscoll & Gregg, 2011; Ouellette & Wilson, 2011). Indeed, convergence and transmedia aspects of affective labor and relational labor across social media pilfer from traditionally feminized forms of non-monetary, reproductive labor. With this in mind, I think of fandom and content creation in relation to Butler's question, "What is the psychic form that power takes?" (Butler, 1997). If fandom convergence is not merely forms of play, but are mediated by an internalization of neoliberal logics, then how are those logics playing out on both micro (personal and subjective) and macro (interacting with the crowds on social media and platform economies) levels of everyday life, particularly for aforesaid content creators? Some scholars have expounded on Butler's provocation and have argued that neoliberalism becomes pervasive in everyday life and turns inwards to have an

entrepreneurial effect on everyday activities such as school, work, or play (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2016; Abidin, 2013).

Therefore, I contribute to this literature by hypothesizing that the psychic life of neoliberalism creates shadow economies on the micro and macro level of content production across social media. Although content creators seemingly have agency in their labor practices, they are always on the clock and in states of precarity, that gig work and platform economies produce; in other words, precarious questions that content creators ask usually follow this train of thought: when will the industry provide content to be reviewed? Is speculation enough to hold the crowd? Am I allowed to take a day or week off? To close here, I contextualize Berlant's "cruel optimism" in relation to content creators. *Pokémon GO*'s creators are consistently uploading content, cross-posting content, and engaging in both free and paid artwork or vlogs. This resonates with Berlant's concept of cruel optimism; for instance, one is able to balance their passion for school or their traditional 9-to-5 job while also doing fanart or vlogs and be compensated for both. In essence, this brings the cruel optimism of the good life into view where one is able to become a balanced person because of their own, individual choices. However, this is an illusion. For Berlant, the cruel optimism of the good life referred to not only being successful but deserving; however, this serves as something just out of reach and not attainable. The worker perceives the good life and reaping its benefits because they deserved it. This good life aligns with the American Dream and the myth of meritocracy where if one works hard enough they will be rewarded; Berlant's intervention about the good life is that there should be ways of thinking about what a "good life" can be without depending on meritocracy (Berlant, 2019). In reality, many creators wind up working

seemingly endless hours a week for both unpaid and paid content and are constantly expected to provide new, intimate, and authentically branded content for their audience. Ultimately, neoliberal logic pervades across social media sites as time and relationship building are self-disciplined and extracted from bodies in exchange for what seems like the circulation and mandate of happiness under neoliberal capitalism.

### **Real Subsumption, Celebrity, & Platform Economies**

This section will discuss how internet celebrity and platform economies intersect with the idea of real subsumption of everyday life and ultimately changes the ways we communicate and pay for interactions online. One of the first critical scholars to interrogate fan labor and power dynamics is Tiziana Terranova. In “Free Labor,” Terranova highlights the connection between the digital economy and what Italian Marxists have called the “social factory” to assert how fans’ free labor is extracted to profit old and new media industries (Terranova, 2013, 34). She asserts that the social factory has shifted work from the traditional 9-to-5 setting to a societal level in which the Internet is given meaning through a continuous, off-the-clock production of value cultivated by fans' commitment to building virtual spaces (Terranova, 2013). The idea of the social factory does not merely apply to fan labor as it can be seen on platforms through various communicative, interactions, and knowledge production that occur between audience and creator. Indeed, other fan studies scholars have argued that fandom economies function as gift sharing economies, where labor is exchanged for the critique of work (Turk, 2014, Jenkins et al., 2013). These gift sharing economies allude to an equal reciprocity between creator and fans that circulate around fans providing financial support and creators providing a deliverable that produces a satisfied response. My work

expounds on this as it is not merely a gift sharing economy of deliverables and financial support, but creators and fans interactions on social media sites are now part and parcel to the success of platforms and their economies. In other words, creators are able to act as self-employed and fans are able to engage and support multiple creators at the same time while the work itself has transitioned to the success of platform economies. I will flesh this concept further throughout the remainder of this section.

Although aforesaid fan studies researchers have investigated the complex, online labor dimensions of fans', the question of how relational *and* platform economies and audience interaction converge for content creators is still understudied. My dissertation contributes to expanding the fan studies scholarship of audience within the age of platform economies by drawing on the burgeoning scholarship within Internet research that takes a critical Marxist and feminist media studies approach to interrogate how labor functions on platforms. Here, it is helpful to understand what Marxist scholar Jason Read has called the transition from formal to real subsumption. Formal subsumption refers to the basic modes of capitalist production around commodity production and wage labor, which ultimately leads to the idea of surplus value via the extension of the working day. Read's work responds and expounds on Marx's sections of formal and real subsumption in *Capital* (1867). Read describes what Marx calls "real subsumption" as a restructuring of social relations in the sense that wealth is no longer produces by bodies but are produced by knowledge, communications, and interactions throughout society (Read, 2003, 104). Read theorizes the transition from formal to real subsumption by addressing how formal subsumption was dependent on the length of the working day, whereas real subsumption is dependent on technology and changes the hours of the "working" day to

be porous (2003, 108-109). In other words, Read's emphasis of real subsumption needs to be thought of as not a single cause or logical transformation of capitalism but thought of as how social relations are reshaped to the overall goal of making all types of labor more intense, productive, and covert (2003, 113-114). In other words, capitalism is not solely the expansion of workers' strategies (e.g. relational labor strategies or branding on social media) but is also inclusive of transforming social relations that occur on platforms. This dovetails to creators on platforms because it is not merely the creators producing wealth via their interactions in a personalized, public space. Instead, wealth is being produced as a type of relationship that is extracted by platforms. Workers are self-employed, construct their own hours, and build relationships with their audience over time while only giving a percentage of their income to the platform and providing free publicity for the platform. In this vein, platforms depend on the worker to not amass wealth themselves but to construct a library of knowledge and interactions that will sustain the platform while concealing working conditions and lack of social accountability such as providing workers with benefits like healthcare, protection from harassment, or paid time off.

Real subsumption segues nicely with Sara Ahmed's concept of "stickiness" (Ahmed, 2010). Although Sara Ahmed is a feminist philosopher and is a pioneering scholar of affect theory, her work is helpful to think of the real subsumption of labor in relation to Pokémon GO content creators. Ahmed says, "Some objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around" (2010); indeed, objects, like fan artefacts, blogs, tweets, and videos, pass around with relative ease in the digital age and are often shared across social media site platforms. Under neoliberal logics, it is perceived that one is a good, loyal, hard-working, and, thus, happy citizen if they are

doing everything according to plan and accumulating monetary and affective/immaterial capital. Evidently, this hard-working and happy citizen narrative resonates with the Terranova's understanding of the social factory and Read's theorization of the shift towards real subsumption is helpful to think how labor not only sticks to objects with positive affective value, but have the potential to become part of newly forming gig work and platform economies that depend on relational labor to generate positive interactions between creator and audience as it will possibly garner monetary value for the former. In other words, content creators who become influencers or microcelebrities are rarely ever famous or household names, but they are consistently building intimate, caring, and seemingly authentic relationships with their audience in order to sustain gig work and be part of the platform economy (Lehto, 2021).

Seemingly more flexible than 9-to-5 or desk jobs in terms of hours and offering the ability to be passionate about one's work, gig work and the gig economy are often used to describe the "precarious working conditions to broader sections of the population" (Haynes & Marshall, 2017). For instance, some examples of gig work include ride-sharing (Uber or Lyft), tutoring, reselling items online, or a similar side hustle. It is crucial to note that gig work is not meant to be a sole entity. In other words, the worker is supposed to embrace a traditional job in conjunction with gig work or embrace multiple gig work jobs or side hustles. Eventually, the worker will be able to hit the jackpot and settle on one gig and earn revenue doing something they are passionate about. Ultimately, it is no surprise that creative work and gig economies are a burgeoning phenomenon across social media. Since both are inherently precarious forms of labor under neoliberal logics, creative work and gig economies depend on one following



entrepreneurial values and individual enterprise (McRobbie 1998, 1999). There is currently a burgeoning literature on gig economies in relation to audiences, shifting labor conditions, and social media use. The term gig economy generally has its origins and empirical studies located in the music industry; for instance, Haynes and Marshall argue that musicians' work has expanded to social media in the sense they have to leverage their audiences on social media in order to sell their product and get bookings (2017, 7). They also assert that musicians are part of the precarious occupation of creative laborers that are always in flux with shifting labor practices and economies (Haynes & Marshall, 2017, 9). Resonating with Baym's work from the previous section, musicians use social media to develop relationships with their fans from what's for breakfast to how to book them, or buy their new album (Baym 2017). One major shift is people not having full-time, traditional jobs. In this vein, people are able to pursue ventures and jobs they are more passionate about. Moreover, and as Brooke Erin Duffy has argued, it creates a future-oriented or aspirational framework around work (Duffy, 2017). This aspirational mindset is always looking ahead at a gig that will thrust someone into fame or a sponsored corporate role. Shifting gears to think about platforms, like YouTube, workers are self-employed. Instead of paying taxes, content creators on YouTube will self-report their income on a standard tax form like a 1099 and 1044 tax forms in the United States. The allure of creators being self-employed is that one is able to create their own hours instead of being bound by the traditional 9-to-5 job. However, creating one's own hours often means tracking analytics and knowing when to produce content so your viewership and potential follower growth increases (Lupton, 2016). Indeed, platforms provide analytics that syncs with one's wearables (Apple Watch) so a creator is never truly off-

the-clock. Moreover, Nick Srnicek has analyzed how social media and corporations that have subsumed social platforms like Amazon buying Twitch and Google buying YouTube signals a shift in how the economy is run (2017). In other words, these corporations ultimately create monopolies and strongholds on the way capital is generated, which is through a self-employed and passionate work model and not providing benefits like healthcare. This dissertation seeks to add to the burgeoning literature of gig work and platform economies by focusing on the *Pokémon GO* fandom, content creators, and precarious work formation across social media sites.

Platforms have given rise to the microcelebrity and influencer as benchmarks of success. Theresa Senft's ethnography on camgirls popularized the term microcelebrity (2008). In her work, she argued that microcelebrities on the internet were unlike traditional celebrities as they provided a sense of closeness, responsiveness, and window into their everyday life (Senft, 2008). For Senft, these digital interactions in the early 2000s via webcams were just as vital as in-person, face-to-face encounters for building a sense of community and friendship. The core difference between microcelebrity and influencer throughout this dissertation is that microcelebrities do not receive larger sponsorships from corporations, whereas influencers do and have the clout to demand or negotiate their pay from corporate sponsors. My use of the word influencer aligns with that of Crystal Abidin's definition. For Abidin, an influencer achieves the following six qualities: scale, platform, audiences, nature, practice, and impact (Abidin, 2018, 14-15). For scale, microcelebrities are small, whereas influencers are positioned as large and can even exceed the fame of traditional, televisual or film celebrities. Platforms for influencers signals the ability to be on social media and appear on television or other

traditional media outlets in order to maintain and grow one's following. For audience, influencers are always in the cognitive process of future-oriented work and think how to game the algorithm and amplify and solidify their following base or fans. Nature for influencers is where fame becomes the goal, whereas for microcelebrities fame is secondary to one's everyday or traditional job. Next, practice is the ability to master one's craft and show the audience how one has progressed in producing top-quality content over a period of time; in essence, growing in front of your audience's eyes. Finally, impact is when an influencer is able to branch out as a well-known name within the community, makes sponsored appearances in traditional media outlets or through a corporate entity, like Niantic or the Pokémon Company International. Chapter three interrogates these measures of influencer status more closely and adds the need for collaboration and the ability to embrace precarity as the norm. Chapters four and five dive deeper into microcelebrity because even with the mass rise of influencers, earning a secondary income and fan support is still crucial within platform cultures. In this sense, this research positions itself as a grounded comparative approach to looking at how creators and fans are interacting with precarity, relationality, and fame across social media sites instead of building relationships and cultivating emotions on only one site. This leads to my final theoretical section regarding gaming across platforms.

### **Gaming Across Platforms & The Impact of Pokémon**

As I am currently writing this dissertation, it is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Pokémon franchise, which released its first game on February 27, 1996. Pokémon has had a lasting impact on gaming communities from online and community-built databases, uploaded Let's Play reactions and speed runs of hand-held games, and now live

streaming and esports competition. Although all gamers might not be Pokémon influencers, microcelebrities, or streamers, all gamers will know of Pokémon and its yellow mouse mascot, Pikachu. The impact of gaming across platforms and live streaming is interrogated in this dissertation, albeit the latter briefly given the 2016 to 2018 data collection timeline.

Platforms require that creators possess the ability to be “flexible” and able to migrate platforms showcase the dangers of precarious working conditions and how platforms can simply close at any time. I am using this term to describe how content creators have to be prepared to migrate between platforms, like YouTube and Twitch, and understand the guidelines and monetization between both. To be clear, platforms during the course of this research project did not require state of government issued identification to gain access or earn an income. It is imperative to note that in 2021, there are various Discord servers and other subcultures on the Internet that require identification in order to partake; these are usually porn or adult content servers or websites in order to avoid closure and seizure by the state. There are also servers or forums that are pseudo-private spaces in order to screen potential clients for sex workers as well, which require state identification verification as well. As of mid-2021, there have also been calls yet no implementation for identification to be required in order to create each social media account as well. For this dissertation, this flexibility is noted throughout my empirical chapters and my second research question as platforms consistently change their policies around content production and moderation. Creators have to also ensure their audience is willing to follow them if they were to migrate platforms based on media trends such as the shift from uploaded, edited content to

unedited, game livestreaming. Indeed, creators constantly have to remain flexible and build up knowledge about how each platform works and interacts with each other and their audience.

Audience desires from gamers and content creators have shifted towards the realm of real-time interaction and engagement. Of course, commenting on uploaded content or a clip is important, but participating in interactive streams where the audience is talking with other audience members and potentially the streamer is crucial and the new norm (Stronberg, 2019). In 2018, it was disclosed that Tyler Blevins, famously known as Ninja on the premier live streaming platform Twitch.tv, makes 500,000 USD a month from the platform (Spector, 2018). Although Ninja is one of few famous gaming influencers, this was the start of esports and live streaming being viewed as a potential and lucrative career path by parents for their kids (Knorr, 2018). It is not without saying that this demand for the true, live self is also a racialized and gendered space. Indeed, scholars like Kishonna Gray have noted how Black gamers experience racism in Xbox and Twitch streams (Gray, 2018).

Prior to the November 2016 presidential election, politics within gaming spaces was not common, particularly in Pokémon GO. However, all of the creators I analyzed on YouTube added statements in their descriptions or tweeted about how racism, sexism, or other forms of hate and harassment would not be tolerated on their channel. Outside of these mentions, it was still evident that most of the influencers on YouTube were still white or white-passing and resided in the United States or European Union. Collaborations with Pokémon GO creators of color or collaborations with black-owned or migrant-owned businesses never occurred. Furthermore, much like Gray pointed out for

Black Xbox and Twitch streamers, Pokémon GO influencers have a very different experience playing the game than people of color. Pacing back and forth looking for a Pokémon has a different impact for white creators than Black creators. Indeed, Black gamers described their encounter with playing Pokémon GO and thinking of the recent murders of Black lives by the police and that fear of being killed quashes any fun (Akil, 2016) Moreover, many communications scholars like Emma Witkowski (2013), Aubrey Anable (2013), and Christine Tran (2021) have discussed the gendered dynamics where women are devalued, sexualized, and seen as “not real gamers” or just a “titty streamer” (Ruberg et al., 2019) in attempts to demonetize their channels. These studies emphasized that women or feminine presenting folks within gaming spaces are constantly seen as less talented and lucrative than their male counterparts. Tran notes how eGirl is often used as a slur to dispel any realness behind the creator’s career (2020). This makes becoming a gamer, especially while Black or identifying as a woman, a precariously self-employed career choice. There is a neoliberalization of gaming that occurs that favors a form of non-politics or interrogating identity politics if it cannot be used to sympathize with audiences. In other words, marginalized identities are important to showcase the diversity within gaming spaces or making those identities feel “safe” within those spaces.

However, much as Gray (2018) and Ruberg et al. (2019) argued, gamers are not afforded mental health protections by platforms regardless of their stance on racism, sexism, or similar forms of discrimination. My intervention here is that creators often build relational bonds with their fans in order to create those social safety nets that platforms do not offer.

Furthermore, the place where content is produced is important to understand realness in gaming cultures. Bo Ruberg and Daniel Lark observe,

The practice of streaming from the bedrooms lays plain the invitation to intimacy and access that is inherent in all livestreaming. After all, the basic fact of streaming implies an intimate invitation: entry, via webcam and direct address, into the private space and thoughts of the streamer. Looking to the bedroom as a site of performance on Twitch reminds us that all livestreaming, wherever it takes place, is an intimate, embodied, gendered, and arguably erotic business that often literally takes place in the home. Put in spatial terms, all streaming is streaming from the bedroom (13).

Although spatial analysis is not necessarily incorporated into this dissertation, the idea of the self-employed creator producing content from their bedroom, or a basement is imperative to think about various relational labor strategies. Indeed, Ruberg and Lark's observation about the intimacy and access that the bedroom space provides relates to my research questions about the commodification of relational practices in order to maintain a financially supportive fanbase. Throughout chapter three, four, and five, I discuss how all work becomes intimate work of cultivating relationality online. The shift from affective to relational labor stems to gaming platforms and their economies as the vital source of revenue. Social interactions and friendship are transformed to become subsumed within capital. This segues to my final section for this introduction that will crystallize the theoretical significance of this literature in relation to each empirical chapter and my methodological approach.

## **Chapter Outline**

Following this introductory chapter, I trace my methodological approach to this dissertation which is conducted via digital ethnography. This digital ethnographic approach placed grounded theory and theoretical sampling at the forefront of data

collection, which highlighted which cultural studies, communication studies, and gender studies theories to draw from. In Chapter two, I discuss why I engaged in certain scholarship and my citational politics instead of relying on a canon, which often references dead white cis men as the only sources of knowledge. In this chapter, I then move on to the ethics I engaged in with consultation from the AoIR Ethics Guidelines for Internet Research 2.0. I proceed to discuss who I engaged in two years of digital ethnographic fieldwork as well as returning for an additional four months to engage in the scroll-back method (Robards and Lincoln, 2017) in order to achieve a thick description when talking about YouTube influencers and a tumblr fanartist who became a lucrative microcelebrity. The bulk of my methods chapter will then engage and justify each method collection instrument I used such as semi-structured interviews and data scraping social media platforms, when appropriate.

The empirical chapters of this dissertation are broken into three standalone academic journal style chapters—chapter three, chapter four, and chapter five. It is important to note that there was initially going to be a place-based ethnographic approach for this dissertation. This was cut for the sake of time as well as after the Pokémon GO Fest in 2017, I was unable to secure any of the influencers for a semi-structured interview or brief conversational chat. This would have ultimately expanded the chapter into two separate data chapters, but that did not occur as I discuss in my methodology chapter as well as in my conclusion about the limitations of this dissertation.

Chapter three of this dissertation examines various content creators who became influencers and sponsored brand ambassadors on YouTube for Pokémon GO. I also look specifically at one creator who failed to become famous and how he traveled around the



world in order to try to become an influencer. Chapter Three engages in scholarship within Internet and communications research within the last decade and looks at various relational and branding strategies that exist for influencers to maintain their success. This chapter takes a deep dive into the influencer culture of YouTube to see how one becomes famous, which is often by happenstance. After discussing influencer culture, the failed influencer, and successful PokéTubers, I move to look at the visibility of whiteness and English-speaking dominance among the Pokémon GO brand ambassadors and influencers. In order to answer my aforementioned research questions, I engage with over 1500 hours of YouTube content and 100,000 scraped tweets to parse out the differences and similarities of ancillary content and merchandise produced by the successful PokéTubers: Mystic7, TrainerTips, PkmnMasterHolly, Reversal, and ZoeTwoDots. Finally, this chapter closes with the shift from popular content being edited and uploaded to demand of live streaming. Although the live streaming began close to the end of my data collection in 2018, there was a general shift in how social media content was consumed and it was preferred for gameplay to be done in real-time rather than uploaded as a recorded Let's Play.

Chapter four is a case study of the fanartist Surfi and their unpaid temporal investment on tumblr. After going viral with their first Pokémon GO post that discusses the presumed gender of Blanche, one of the Team Leaders, Surfi continued creating free content for their burgeoning audience. I use this chapter to answer my research questions by conceptualizing various labor and emotional strategies that Surfi engaged with their fans that fall under the guise of neoliberalism. My research questions primarily focus What I mean here is that Surfi felt compelled to maintain their new audience by working

for free and putting in an additional, at minimum, 30 hours of week on artwork, which tatters a second full-time job with no benefits besides potential digital exposure.

Furthermore, Surfi is the only creator outside the U.S., U.K., and E.U paradigm who did not have access to particular resources to scale their audience like the YouTubers in chapter three. This chapter asserts that the unpaid, temporal investments, tumblr's conversational tag culture, and the ability to be transparent about one's commitment to queer representation and storytelling provided the building blocks to maintain a supportive audience that would eventually be willing to support Surfi at the subscription, crowdfunding level.

Chapter five extends my previous chapter's theoretical moves by analyzing the crowdfunding subscription-based platform Patreon in order to think about how crowdfunding has shifted to monthly engagement rather than one-time donations. Particularly, I flesh out what happens when a content creator becomes a microcelebrity and has built up a large audience and reputation that demands additional income to be within the realm of neoliberal productivity. This chapter takes into account the shifting crowdfunding models from one-time donations to monthly and membership or subscription-based. Chapter Five serves as a demarcation of how crowdfunding on membership-based platforms like Patreon signals a move away from purely relational building that occurs on social media to relational bonding for a sustained, crowdfunding income in exchange for exclusive, personalized content, like the wallpaper shown in figure 1.7. This chapter showcases various strategies that are used to achieve a level of relational bonding (similar to the strength of a strong triple bond in chemistry) where the

audience will support the creator even without receiving exclusive content at the end of each month.

Finally, Chapter Six is my conclusion and brings together my three central research questions to summarize how each of them is interconnected and were answered within each of my data chapters. Each data chapter had the commonality of building off of the research questions that were introduced in this chapter and then answered based on the data collected from that specific case study. This conclusion also discusses the various limitations and challenges that I had with this project as well as the possibilities for future and ongoing research regarding platform economies and relational labor. I also posit ideas and current projects that I am thinking about and working on that have sent out of this dissertation and this research particularly within gaming cultures that looks at the politicization and use of games in political elections and harnessing the power of gaming to transform the political engagements among voters, particularly millennials and zoomers. Ultimately, this dissertation introduces digital ethnographic approaches to studying gaming cultures and digital cultures in relation to platform economies and relationality across social media. In the following chapter, I will discuss my digital math ethnographic approach an outline each of the research methods I have used as well as my engagement in self reflexive, ethical research practices.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Searching Far & Wide:**

### **Methodology for Triangulating a Digital Ethnographic Approach**

#### **Introduction**

This dissertation broadly asks how content creators are building relationships with their audience that foster continued financial support as well as how content creators are navigating shifting platform ecologies that promote or hinder monetizing their content and relationships. In my introduction, I explained the transition for content creators from emotional labor to relational labor, the latter of which highlights unstructured involvement from platforms and personalized emotional interaction with one's audience. Specifically, I ask how the intersection of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism via branding, analytics, and personalized media production are interacting with Pokémon GO creators' ability to be successful on platforms. Specifically, I use the Pokémon GO phenomenon that began in July 2016 as a starting point to interrogate these questions through a digital ethnographic approach that I will elaborate throughout this chapter.

As a digital ethnographer, I take an intersectional feminist standpoint as my methodology to deploy digital ethnographic research. Feminist standpoint theory asserts that research is understood to not merely be neutral or outside of political lives. Sandra Harding names this approach "strong objectivity," which contends that the perspectives of marginalized and disenfranchised communities can aid in creating more nuanced understandings of the world (Harding, 1995). Particularly, I contend with how technology and platforms impact the lives of women, queer, or non-US based content creators. My experience as a queer, non-binary, white, scholar-activist-gamer informs my inside

knowledge with the Pokémon GO community and aspects of the socioeconomic networks that content creators experience on social media platforms. This dissertation also engages in allowing the research questions described in the introduction to remain open. The openness I am referring to is to conceptualize platforms are constantly changing and new policies around content production and moderation emerged throughout this project. Indeed, when I first started this project, Patreon was perceived as a crowdfunding platform and tumblr was filled with porn and not-safe-for-work images. The importance of openness for this project in relation to platforms allows what scholars have deemed as a strong emotional component where a “flow” is achieved and strong, social bonds between researcher and participants develop (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004). Ultimately, this openness allows for this project to seek new and changing information on how technology, platform economies, and audience relationality impacts content creators’ livelihood and work.. This relates to strong objectivity because the creators lived experiences are acknowledged and discussed throughout my empirical chapters and aids in understanding how building relationships for financial and emotional support on platforms occur.

In this chapter, I outline my digital ethnographic methodological approach in both of my case studies and how this triangulating of digital ethnography was interwoven together to answer my research questions. My first research question asks: What are the various relational labor strategies that Pokémon GO influencers engage in order to create and maintain a financially supportive gaming fanbase across platforms? My next research question is deeply intertwined with my first to ask how are Pokémon GO influencers’ gaming content and interactions with their fanbase affected by the commodification of

relational practices by ever shifting platform policies around content creation and moderation? Finally, I asked how the intersection of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism via branding, analytics, and personalized media production are interacting with Pokémon GO creators' ability to be successful on platforms? These three research questions grounded my decision to use a digital ethnographic approach for this project. Before continuing, I pause to begin the next section borrowing from Sara Ahmed's "Feminist Points" to highlight my citational politics throughout this dissertation. I also contend with the lack of no national Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards on social media research. As such, I briefly discuss the Association of Internet Researchers ethics for Internet research to posit how we as scholars devoted to public and cultural understandings of the internet can develop ethical guidelines so that one can protect everyday research participants while doing digital ethnography. Then, I discuss my pilot study as my initial foray as a digital ethnographer and how I developed the skills to conduct this project. Next, I discuss in-depth my triangulating a digital ethnographic approach for my dual case studies of Pokémon GO YouTubers and tumblr fanartists; I explain the nuance between becoming an influencer and microcelebrity as well as the geopolitical stakes for engaging in these dual case studies. The core difference between microcelebrity and influencer throughout this dissertation is that microcelebrities do not receive large sponsorships from corporations. I rely on Theresa Senft's argument that microcelebrities on the internet are unlike traditional celebrities as microcelebrities provided a sense of closeness, responsiveness, and window in their everyday life (Senft, 2008). Not all of the creators I analyzed became influencers because they did not achieve all of the following six modes: scale, platform, audiences, nature, practice, and impact

(Abidin, 2018, 14-15). Finally, I close by borrowing Naheed Islam's (2014) term "act of betrayal" to show how I engage in a self-reflexive, messy process that interrogates my silences during the interview or observation processes and lack of critical attention and failure to capture data regarding some social identities, like race or dis/ability.

## **Citational Politics & IRB Ethics**

My resolve as a digital ethnographer and feminist media studies scholar aligns with Sara Ahmed's citational politics throughout this dissertation. In "Making Feminist Points," Ahmed pointedly brings up the question of "who appears" when one is presenting a paper (2013). This "who appears" is often challenged by other academics in the room by asking how does one relates to a white male theorist; which keeps academic disciplines rigid and stymies any potential for research to be viewed and engaged with outside white male genealogies. Ahmed develops this point further in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, showing how citational practices in academia can be used as feminist bricks and memories and explaining that "citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (Ahmed, 2017, 17). Of course, white, cisgender (sometimes dead) men have offered invaluable context to the field of Communications, Cultural Studies, and Internet Research methodology; however, time and time again, aforesaid scholars are positioned as a type of canonical knowledge that must be cited in order for one's work to be valid. There are innumerable women scholars, scholars of color, queer scholars, and independent researchers and activists that are often glossed over because they critiqued and expanded the work of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, or Theodor Adorno as well as built their own theoretical frameworks to

help researchers analyze, research, and engage the everyday life and political regimes of media. To close, I also acknowledge that my positionality as a white, queer, non-binary person is important for this citational practice and my research agenda. Often times, a white person invoking their citational practices merely name drops a citation and does not engage the work of the author. Similar to the Bechdel test, the Gray test, named after “Digital Herstorian” Kishonna Gray, an academic piece of writing or journal article must not only cite the scholarship of at least two women and two non-white people, but must also discuss it throughout the body of the text (Belcher, 2018). Thus, it is important for me and other white scholars to not merely cite work from women and queer folks of color for the sake of citational name dropping to appear progressive without engaging in the labor of anti-racist scholarship. I will now move on to discuss the politics of my research methods and the Institutional Review Board.

The politics and ethics of how researchers conduct qualitative and ethnographic studies is often in relation to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, when I began my research in 2016, there were no national Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards on social media or platform research. As such, I needed to consider how I could protect everyday research participants while in the field. For this project, I followed suggestions by the University of Minnesota:

Most importantly, you must remember that no social media site can provide absolute anonymity, confidentiality, or privacy. It is up to the researcher, when designing a protocol, to understand the various privacy and data security plans of the intended social media site to be used including how the data is transmitted and how it is maintained.

As a digital ethnographer and feminist media studies researcher, I contest this testimony regarding “it is up to the researcher.” Indeed, during my initial IRB exemption process,



questions arose regarding qualitative data software like NVivo and MAXQDA being used to store data on one computer. Furthermore, questions about how data scraping mass amounts of tweets and unstructured qualitative data unveiled questions pertaining to announcing my presence as a researcher, which is not physically or virtually possible. The IRB at the University of Minnesota and most other universities in the United States do not have a way of managing feminist methods and digital ethnographic research for potential harm. In other words, there is no breakdown of a medical IRB, ethnographic IRB, and generalist IRB for research projects. Indeed, most projects that include oral histories, unstructured interviews, and other feminist or ethnographic methods are often exempt from IRB review. Elizabeth Chin argues that the IRB is entrenched within a “culture of assessment” within the neoliberal university and that metrics are used to decide what counts as knowledge and what is merely conversational (2013, 206). Since many qualitative and ethnographic projects escape this assessment culture, their potential for doing harm to research participants or communities can potentially go unchecked. Chin also mentions that even though feminist methods are designed to engage in as little harm and trauma as possible, there is still always the case of research being inadvertently invasive and potentially life-destroying, which the IRB was created to prevent. Referencing to citational politics, the IRB does not take seriously work that cannot be quantified or is not seen as part of a behavioral or psychological study. IRBs ultimately abdicate rigor and protection for research participants in support of maintaining research and discipline structures. As such, and after receiving an IRB exemption from the University of Minnesota, I turned to the Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines 2.0 for this project.

Founded in May 1999, The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) is an academic association dedicated to the support of and ethical commitment for the field of internet studies (AoIR). This dissertation's ethical decisions were made with guidance from the 2012 "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research Guide Version 2.0" (AoIR). AoIR describes Internet research as any of the following:

- (a) Utilizes the internet to collect data or information, e.g. through online interviews, surveys, archiving, or automated means of data scraping;
- (b) Studies how people use and access the internet, e.g. through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites, listservs, web sites, blogs, games, virtual worlds, or other online environments or contexts;
- (c) Utilizes or engages in data processing, analysis, or storage of datasets, databanks, and/or repositories available via the internet.
- (d) Studies software, code, and internet technologies;
- (e) Examines the design or structures of systems, interfaces, pages, and elements;
- (f) Employs visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or other methods of analysis to study the web and/or internet-facilities images, writings, and media forms;
- (g) Studies large scale production, use, and regulation of the internet by governments, industries, corporations, and military forces. (AoIR, 2012).

In juxtaposition with the University of Minnesota guidelines and IRB process, AoIR's ethical Internet research guide provided a sound approach to the field of Internet and social media research without a simple blanket statement towards social media platforms. AoIR aided the process approach to ethics I used to protect and benefit my research participants. In this dissertation, I do my best to paraphrase non-essential quotations and give pseudonyms to those who do not permit me to use their name, when I could not announce my position as a researcher, *and* for public comments on YouTube or Twitter. I will *not* anonymize those who have obtained "celebrity-like" status on social media sites, particularly those content creators who have over 10,000 followers or subscribers. These individuals are already well-known to the public and are producing content that is essential for my data analysis about affective engagements, relational labor, and gig or

platform economies; they have become public-figures and brand ambassadors for The Pokémon Company International. Finally, I will clearly state who I follow and who I pledge support via Patreon (monthly payments), particularly Surfaceage. It is important to note that being an academic-fan (aca-fan) does not preclude me from supporting those who are creative workers as neoliberal logics creates a consistent state of crisis or precarity around labor. Furthermore, the labor that creative workers engage for researchers deserves to be compensated when possible and when funding allows. My next section will describe my digital ethnographic approach and triangulating multiple qualitative methods while conducting this project.

### **Triangulating a Digital Ethnographic Approach**

I conducted a longitudinal, 26-month digital ethnographic study across social media and gaming platforms like YouTube, tumblr, Twitter, Patreon, and Twitch to examine Pokémon GO influencers, microcelebrities, and audience members. From July 2016 until October 2018, my ethnographic approach included semi-structured interviews with content creators, participant observation through watching over 1,500 hours of YouTube content, data scraping over 100,000 comments and tweets from YouTube and Twitter influencers, microcelebrities, and fans, respectively, commenting on posts and tweets, and shadowing the everyday life of a popular fanartist in the Philippines for two years. Interviews, participant observation, and critical discourse analysis of content creators and audience posts, comments, other textual cues, and gif and meme responses are the crux of my data collection methods and are indeed “the centerpiece of any truly ethnographic approach” in the digital age that helps in understanding specific cultures and the inner-workings of a community (Boellstorff, 2008, 69). To highlight the inner-

workings of the Pokémon GO community, my dissertation began with a short introduction of my experience and history with the Pokémon franchise. This was meant to give a glimpse of the memories that I have accumulated throughout more than 15 years playing Pokémon and being part of the Pokémon community through online forums, competitive battling and trading card game, and console games. My own personal lived experience enmeshed with my digital ethnographic approach that included triangulating several methods aforesaid served as a crux for my feminist methodological standpoint.

If ethnography and participant observation are methodological approaches for studying everyday life and cultures (Boellstorff et al, 2012), then I along with this dissertation are theoretically committed to exploring fans' labor, communities, online/offline cultures, and gig and platform economies through my own lived experiences and scholarship as well as personal and fans' testimony. I use multiple methods like interviews, shadowing a creator's everyday life, and data scraping mass comments in order to triangulate and link various micro and macro processes of platform economies and labor that creators and audiences engage with in the everyday. This triangulation of methods, theories, and methodology is not meant to simply catch data that I might miss, but is a conscious choice in order to "enhance confidence in the ensuing findings" and to overcome limitations that applying one single qualitative method might have on specific places or social networks (Denzin, 1970; Yeasmin & Rahman 2012). For the sake of this project, I will be engaging with three of the four forms of triangulation that Denzin (1970) describes,

- 1) Data triangulation: refers to gathering data through several sampling strategies so that sections of the data are taken at different times and social contexts as well as on a wide demographic of people.

- 2) Theoretical triangulation: refers to the use of more than one theoretical standpoint in interpreting data.
- 3) Methodological triangulation: refers to the use of more than one method for gathering data. (Denzin, 1970; Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012).

Triangulating data collection, theories from communications and gender studies, and ethnographic frameworks is a complicated task, but helps to cross-check and produce rigorous qualitative research. As Naheed Islam asserts there is a feminist praxis and moment of reflexivity that are inherently dependent on multiple methods and being transparent in one's methodological approach (Islam, 2014). This approach is particularly appropriate given the increasingly global dimensions of content creators and fans' creative labor and interactions. Content creators and fans are not only producing content for their specific location, but for the entire world to consume, comment, and critique; therefore, there is a need to manage the audience's emotions and keep them engaged with personalized content. This personalization of content often means that creators are engaging in cognitive work to predict what their audience will want instead of relying on algorithmic design from platforms. This triangulation approach in combination with an analysis of social media cultures and platform policies will assist in highlighting the interconnectedness between immaterial labor and neoliberal mandates of creating happiness to achieve the good life (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011) and the real subsumption of everyday life as profit or opportunity (Read, 2003; Clough, 2008). I stop short of declaring that my methodology will reveal these connections as a whole because they are based through critical and standpoint theory. This dissertation not only has a methodological commitment but also a commitment, as discussed earlier, to a broad range of scholarship and theory.

By triangulating data collection methods, this dissertation builds on the works of digital ethnography (Hine, 2015, Pink et al., 2016, Gomez-Cruz & Ardevol, 2014, Kozinets, 2010) and approaches social media platforms as a field to interrogate. Instead of being an outsider and having a hands-off approach to research, I was committed to engaging with the internet and its users as well as interrogating digital spaces as just as important as placed-based interactions. Indeed, and in her watershed work that popularized the term microcelebrity, Terri Senft argues that online interactions must be taken as seriously as placed-based interactions (Senft, 2008). In the last 15 years, there has been a burgeoning of digital ethnographic scholarship that seeks to place qualitative modes of inquiry at the forefront of research about social media platforms and gaming and influencer cultures (Abidin, 2016, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Baym, 2018; Beuving, 2020; Boellstorff, 2008; boyd, 2009; Chan & Gray, 2020; Guarriello, 2019; Taylor, 2018; Tiidenberg, 2019). This dissertation uses digital ethnography to add to scholarly literature on digital methods as well as bridging discussions about affect, participatory cultures, and the psychic, entrepreneurial effects of neoliberalism on *Pokémon GO* content creators and audiences. My contribution here is to not treat neoliberal concepts as a zero-sum game, but to interrogate the various relational and entrepreneurial effects that have emerged within social media and membership-based crowdfunding platforms. This research also engages with the everyday working conditions such as routine postings, personalizing content, and cross-platform engagement that is required from content creators who become microcelebrities or influencers. Specifically for influencers of *Pokémon GO* on YouTube and tumblr, I add to the aforesaid scholarship by interrogating the

commodification of relational practices by ever shifting platform policies around content creation and moderation, which I discuss briefly in my next paragraph.

Finally, I re-entered the digital field in December 2018 after an announcement from tumblr banning all Adult Content or Not Safe for Work (NSFW) content starting in early December 2018. The Tumblr NSFW content ban was important to this project because it showcased two scenarios about artificial intelligence (AI) dealing with content moderation. First, the AI removed any images of “female presenting nipples” as well as other images classified as potential nudity or adult content. The AI was so faulty that it would remove cartoon nipples, images of Pokémon because its butt (which was its backside) was exposed or the Pokémon’s legs were spread open. Second, this faulty AI used to moderate NSFW content resulted in the audience pinpointing which posts were removed from Surfi’s tumblr as there was no notification for content being flagged or taken down. As such, and discussed in greater detail in chapter four, the audience was devoted to Surfi’s content that they engaged in the unpaid labor to find which works went missing and alert Surfi to appeal to tumblr to restore the artwork. Because of the importance of this platform policy change, I retroactively employed what Robards and Lincoln have called the “scrolling back method” in order to uncover and digitally trace changes over time with content and how the platform’s algorithm or policies ultimately affected the content creators I researched (Robards and Lincoln, 2017). This scrolling-back pulled posts from November 2018 through the end of December 2018 to see the impact of the tumblr Adult Content Ban that is discussed in chapter four. This scroll-back method is particularly limited to chapter four as the YouTubers and crowdfunding site Patreon were unaffected by the new Adult Content Ban from tumblr.

## **Walking Through Platforms: YouTube, Twitter, tumblr, & Patreon**

I use this section to engage with the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) for each platform that I analyzed throughout this dissertation. It is imperative to assert that this method was not named when the research project began, but mimicked very closely to what Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay (2018) have popularized as the app or platform walkthrough method. This method was tacitly used throughout this research project in order to systematically engage with understanding how a platform's mechanics and algorithms work for users and creators. Light et al. detail three general stages for the walkthrough method: registration and entry, everyday use, and suspension, closure, or leaving (2018). These stages are essential for building engagement, tuning the platform's algorithm for the researcher's preferences, and to understand page layout and features. Although I did not have this walkthrough toolkit or lexicon in 2016 and 2017, I explain how I engaged with the aforesaid walkthrough stages for the following platforms: YouTube, Twitter, tumblr, and Patreon.

For YouTube, I engaged in a traditional participant observation approach. Consistent with the three stages of the walkthrough method, I used my main university assigned Google account to engage with content on YouTube and Twitter and also created an alias account without any identifying information to solely engage with Pokémon GO influencers. Because YouTube algorithmically filters content based on watching and subscription patterns, I engaged in commentary from my alternative account, which was essentially a clean slate when I began conducting this research. I observed platform mechanics and received notifications of when new videos were uploaded on both Google accounts. To the best of my ability, I tried to like each uploaded video and engage in the everyday content that was posted by the influencers on YouTube



or Twitter. During the addition of producing live content on livestreaming platforms outside of YouTube, like Facebook Live and Twitch, I was not able to engage as thoroughly with the walkthrough method.

Since the Pokémon GO influencers were also on Twitter, I engaged in the same practices with my two Google accounts that were linked and verified to my Twitter accounts. I noticed that twitter was primarily used as an ancillary platform to YouTube in order to alert fans when the creator uploaded a new video. Often an abridged or synopsis of the YouTube video was advertised and hyperlinked on Twitter. This was often done to engage the audience and to build one's social media analytical profile by receiving more clicks and engagements on both Twitter and YouTube. This tweet about a new video was done because there was often a delay in YouTube's notifications to fans when a video was uploaded. I often experienced a 30 minute to two-hour delay in receiving an email about a new video being uploaded, whereas Twitter notified me of every tweet, inclusive of new videos, that the influencer made. Of course, other users would have to enable this feature, but Twitter's role as an ancillary and supportive social media platform to YouTube became clear throughout this research.

For this project, I took a mostly anonymous walkthrough approach when analyzing tumblr. Inconsistent with the walkthrough method is that tumblr was mostly anonymous for users and, to a lesser extent, creators. Unlike YouTube and Twitter, engagement on tumblr is usually anonymous, which is sometimes inclusive of the creator as well; although users may know who a creator is, unless they have seen them in person, photographs or selfies of the creator are often not posted to other social media sites. Users are often anonymous or on their alternative account when asking questions or liking and

reblogging content (Tiidenberg, 2019). As a platform, engagement between creators or blog owner and users respect a level of shared anonymity. Scholarship on tumblr often discusses how this anonymity gave rise to many queer communities. Scholarship has focused on the platform as a space for affective circulating intensely via images (Cho, 2015) or how porn and sex-positive pages created non-heteronormative spaces and discourses for various users (McCracken et al., 2020). My methodological and analytical engagement of tumblr comes from, first, my experience as one of these queer users who learnt much about gay and queer sex through the platform; second, engaging with the affective and unpaid temporal investments to build a type of queer relationality with one's users as Surfi accomplished.

As the only non-social media platform I analyzed, I engaged with a very personal approach to researching Patreon as the platform always had me present as the researcher. Gaining entry required me committing to supporting Surfi's work outside of this research project, so it was not mere exploitation. Furthermore, the support I provided Surfi on Patreon allowed me direct, de-anonymized conversations with Surfi and built rapport. Patreon is different than the aforesaid platforms because it is a membership-based crowdfunding platform that requires payment to have various levels of access. Additionally, at the time of writing, scholarship on Patreon is limited to quantitative analysis that track various levels of monetary support in lieu of advertising revenue (Regner, 2020) and the rhetorical structures to build credibility and reliability of rewards (Schmidt, 2017). My contribution to the scholarship and methodology of doing research on Patreon was to shadow and engage in weekly conversations with Surfi. Shadowing entailed receiving notifications for when they would post content, note when a live

questions and answers section would be hosted, or polls for rewards. I also followed-up with weekly check-ins and would inquire about Surfi's weekly work schedule given their primary job as a software engineer. Doing this showcased how Patreon, unlike other social media platforms, required a type of constant relationship building with one's most devoted fans. This allowed me to explore what I call "relational bonding" to signal extremely strong bonds between creator and fan at length throughout chapter five.

### **Data Collection: Participant Observation**

Most of my data collection occurred through YouTube, Twitter, tumblr, and Patreon with me as a commentator, supporter, and lurker at various times. This type of approach can be described as participant observation as I engaged in the "daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture" (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, 1). All the YouTube videos, tweets, or tumblr posts I commented on were public and anyone could reply to or direct message me on my University assigned Google account or the anonymous Google account I created. For most of this project, I was an engaged audience member and tried to maintain a regular viewing schedule of new Pokémon GO YouTube content as it was uploaded by the Influencers I followed. The one exception to my engagement was during live streams. During these streams, I was a participant-lurker and I did not announce that I was a researcher after the first stream as I was timed out from chatting or sending emotes for off-topic spam.

Chapter five, which focuses on the membership-based crowdfunding platform Patreon is the only portion of the dissertation that uses a semi-private, non-social media space. Patreon is an image-heavy platform that has the most content behind a monthly

donation. Patreon is not completely a public or private space as potential patrons may pledge a certain amount, gain access, and then leave the platform before paying each month's donation. As such, chapter five contains several figures and exclusively published artwork from Surfi's Patreon. When quoting from patrons, I paraphrase comments and do not link a specific post to their comment in order to protect their identity anonymity.

### **Data Collection: Theoretical Sampling & Data Scraping**

This project relied on theoretical sampling, in which themes and theories were made explicit as I received the data from my interviews, digital ethnographic field notes, memos, webpage and tweet scraping, and other image and text-based documents (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Gomez-Cruz & Ardevol 2014, Hine 2015, Stewart 2015, Markham 2017). Aforesaid documents will be analyzed through a ground theory approach as well to describe experiences and achieve thick description (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). I conducted open and focused coding to sort my data into definitions, categories, and memorable quotes that are meaningful to the theoretical framework I outlined in chapter one as well as new theories that emerged from my fieldwork and data collection sources (Bernard and Ryan, 2010; Lofland et al., 2006; Saladana, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saladana, 2014). In chapter four, I introduce the term queer relationality to showcase the relationships Surfi built with their audience on tumblr. Queer relationality showcased the intimate storytelling and labor that creators engage in when corporations do not appeal to a wide audience. In other words, queer relationality on tumblr allowed fans to see themselves portrayed within the Pokémon GO game and within the Pokémon canon. The queer relationality on tumblr let to the most notable of the theories that emerged, which I

call relational bonding that is discussed at length in chapter five. This relational bonding became essential to understanding how membership-based crowdfunding platforms like Patreon operate and expanding the conversation on relational labor for a particular platform. As I scraped data, I would take memos and decide what topics, comments, or hashtags to pull next as I was using NCapture from Nvivo or a javascript auto-expander, which both had limits on how much data they could pull a day. The methodological approach to scraping data and where to pull comments or tweets next allowed me to keep my project questions open and recalibrate and collect data from new sites, like Patreon, as the research was underway.

I used NVivo qualitative data software to code and organize my transcribed interviews, Twitter and YouTube data sets, fieldnotes, and webpage scraping and screenshots according to themes, codes, and relevant segments of text (Bernard and Ryan, 2010; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). I used NVivo's features to create and export codebooks that I read continually throughout the data collection to reorganize themes and interview questions as necessary and to identify any glaring gaps in the research. I wrote analytical and self-reflexive memos to expound on theoretical relationships between the codes and reflect on relationships between the data obtained from interviews as well as online/offline observation to articulate emerging theoretical implications. These memos were used to keep the project "open" and shape its evolution or need to reframe certain questions (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Harding, 2008; Sprague, 2016), which eventually allowed me to re-enter the field briefly in December 2018. In addition, NVivo helped in the process of triangulating my digital ethnographic approach and datasets in order to glean new insights (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Particular insights for YouTube influencers was how

many views and comments they received on their video in a certain period of time. In other words, most videos received commentary or engagement within the first 24-hours of being posted. Another insight was for Patreon where sentimentality was traced through the comments to Surfi. The commentary showed how fans just wanted to support Surfi and that the rewards have become secondary for most of us. Both of these insights highlight the imperative of relational labor practices and how they differ from emotional labor; the difference here is that there is no manager or human resources engaging or training one to work on platforms. Creators have to build relationships with their fans who are essentially the ones who pay them and can thrust their career to corporate sponsorship. Although there are paid services like Tweet Archivist or PowerText, I created my own digital archive of tweets and data library through the use of NVivo and curating my own data throughout the research process. This was done as an affordable way to see and sample for recurring tweets and other social media comments on YouTube and Twitter. I sought access to the Library of Congress's database of tweets as another affordable venue, but it was not available for public use at that time (see appendix A).

The scraping of the data from Twitter and YouTube as well as tumblr and Patreon was used differently throughout each of the empirical chapters. Although I accumulated a lot of tweets and comments from Twitter and YouTube, the dataset was too large to organize and code. Furthermore, after watching two years or roughly 1,500 hours of YouTube content from the aforesaid Pokémon GO influencers and engaging in Twitter conversations with influencers and fans, I decided that this was enough for chapter three. Additionally, this observation and engagement allowed me to trace how influencer status

is built, branded, and personalized for the audience and how various relational labor strategies occurred on YouTube and Twitter. The use of the Twitter and YouTube commentary dataset will be used in another, future project about Pokémon GO influencers and cross-platform participation. With permission from Surfacage, I scraped their Patreon and tumblr pages and used it only for a conference and this dissertation's purpose. Clipping images for chapters four and five were essential as data scraping software usually only gathers text or HTML webpages. Particularly for tumblr, I went through each post and cross-referenced with the scraping and clipping I engaged with. For tumblr this was important because conversations happen in the tagging system. For Patreon, I manually scraped Surfi's content instead of depending on software because I did not want to potentially have their pseudo-private space and exclusive content leaked by a third party software. Finally, all data was secured on one sole device and only used by me as per University of Minnesota protocols.

### **Data Collection: Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviews are often a hallmark of any ethnographic approach yet proved difficult throughout many portions of this project even with my previous pilot study training. For the YouTubers, I was unable to secure interviews with five out of six content creators I observed. Throughout the data collection process, I attempted to reach out to Mystic7, TrainerTips, PkmnMasterHolly, ZoeTwoDots, and Reversal several times in 2017 and early 2018 but did not receive a reply. Colton Robtoy replied to me in early 2017 and provided a brief interview as he had to maintain his Pokémon GO across the world schedule. He never followed up to complete the interview and as mentioned earlier, he deleted all of his tweets and videos soon after. During the research process, I also learned

that the rest of the Pokémon GO influencers I tracked had signed non-disclosure agreements with Niantic after attending and publishing a video about the chaotic failure of the first Pokémon Go festival in Chicago, Illinois. Without being able to interview these content creators,, I proceeded with other modes of data collection and re-worked my initial plan to track how influencers build relationships with their audience and manage platform ecologies and economics.

During my semi-structured interviews, I embraced a feminist research standpoint where interruptions, tangents, and questions are acceptable forms of practice (Saldana & Omasta, 2017). For instance, during my interview with Surfi and given our time zone differences, they had to put me on hold for a “few minutes” (which became over an hour) in order to finish a task for their main job. Additionally, we had side conversations about our favorite Pokémon, favorite characters, and discussed at length our coffee addiction, which did not make it into the transcript. It is imperative to note that there are power inequalities during the interview process between Surfi and me. I had more institutional power and access than Surfi, yet Surfi was far more familiar with how payout systems like Patreon worked. Furthermore, my context of living in the U.S. and with my research focus often locked on U.S. and E.U. paradigms of influencers and microcelebrities, my lived experiences influenced how I shaped my research questions and analyzed the data in chapters four and five. Indeed, as Doucet and Mauthner articulate, the researcher should “consider how power influences knowledge production and construction processes” (2006, 40). Furthermore, my privilege as a white researcher in the U.S. academic system influenced how I designed my research questions around the political economies of platforms. For instance, although my questions might be specific to how



platforms or creators use platforms within the U.S., Surfi clearly did not perceive their digital art as a stable, full-time job. Additionally, Surfi did not see potential in leaving their stable software engineering job for a chance at becoming famous, whereas other creators, particularly those on YouTube, who went viral shifted their content or work to focus on Pokémon GO.

### **Data Collection: Reflexivity**

The reason for engaging in a triangulation technique with a digital ethnographic approach was to engage in a reflexive process. This methodological framework owes its origins to Naheed Islam's "Research as an Act of Betrayal" (2014). In Islam's piece, she discusses silence that occurs during the interview process when one's participant might say something racist or sexist, which goes against the researcher's political standpoint and anti-racist politics (Islam, 2014). Even though the researcher might have insider knowledge or access to a community, those things combined do not necessarily give one authority when engaging in conversation with others. Islam is specifically mentioning the dilemma when interviewing the Bangladeshi immigrant community in Los Angeles, California and not addressing potentially racist or sexist moments with interviewees and potentially being seen as a traitor to her community if she did say something during the interview. In this vein, and especially when scraping or analyzing image-heavy data, I felt as if I was not wearing my activist or critical scholar hat. There was commentary from folks directed towards PkmnMasterHolly about her gender and flaunting her body as well as commentary towards Surfi about not knowing the difference between whitewashing and portraying Black people. Since I was anonymous throughout most of my tumblr data collection and did not necessarily know who to reply to, I had no way of engaging in

these conversations. Furthermore, I have been a gamer in the Pokémon community for over 15 years, which has given me a type of historical knowledge of the franchise and relationships among communities. Although Pokémon is not as competitive as the Super Smash Bros., World of Warcraft, or other high reward esports, toxicity still exists. Indeed, there were moments of racist, sexist, and homophobic chats and tweets that occurred during the data collection, particularly during participant observation, that I was silent on.

As Islam argues, when she was silent on someone from her community engaging in a racist mode of thinking, it becomes an act of betrayal because silences are a betrayal of one's anti-racist politic (Islam, 2014, 477). So, learning from this project, I tried to pay attention throughout the moments within my datasets and incorporate my moments of silence or acts of betrayal for future research projects such as my *New Media & Society* article about game livestreaming and personalized media economies on YouTube Gaming that I published in 2019 as a sub-branch of this research.

Furthermore, who gets to do reflexive research? There is a type of “uncomfortable reflexivity” that occurs for those who have access to institutional power like the University (Pillow, 2003). To be clear I do not try to claim a type of ignorance or innocence in this project. I have used this section to note the process of reflexivity, especially for digital ethnographers and for scholars and early career researchers of Internet cultures, so that one can account for various, unequal power dynamics that occur during participant observation or interviews. Additionally, the practice of data scraping and being able to engage in conversational dialogue without much fear of being doxed or harassed online is another type of privilege that I experienced throughout this project.

Engaging in political conversations that may address racism or sexism within gaming spaces can often lead to commentary by other folks within the community of overthinking the situation. Besides Pokémon GO, the Pokémon franchise as a whole is supposed to be a space where politics are not necessarily embodied. In other words, it is not about gender or race, but simply being good at the game whether it be Pokémon GO or the Pokémon Trading Card Game. However, like any critical research context and since players are not divorced from their lived identities and experiences, politics around gender and race exist within the Pokémon community.

In closing, this chapter engages with the vast scholarship on internet or digital ethnography (Hine 2015, Pink et al. 2016, Gomez-Cruz & Ardevol 2014, Kozinets 2010). This project uses the detailed digital ethnographic approach to bridge discussions about affect, participatory cultures, and the psychic of neoliberalism's entrepreneurial methods on *Pokémon GO* content creators and audiences. Indeed, this dissertation asks how content creators are building relationships with their audience that foster continued financial support. Furthermore, I interrogate how content creators are navigating shifting platform ecologies and policies that promote or hinder monetizing their content and relationships with their fans. This chapter has established my methodological expertise, reasoning, and provides the groundwork for conducting ethical social media research across platforms. Before continuing, I will address my limitations to this research project.

## **Limitations**

My digital ethnography as a methodological approach is by no means the only methodology to approach this project nor is it without flaws. This digital ethnographic approach's greatest pitfall to many scholars is its rather small sample size, which is fewer

than 30). Although some chapters will exceed 30 people in the sense of content pulled, other chapters will be well under this statistical threshold. Furthermore, there is no method of generalizing or providing a statistical significance that could be of use for understanding the future of work on social media platforms. In other words, this statistical significance is not required in the critical work that I have engaged throughout the following three empirical chapters. My use of ethnography and incorporation of affect theory will not allow the study to be generalizable or comprehensive as it could be if I incorporated a more mixed methods approach with social network analytics (such as statistics of where fans are engaging in this content) or full-on data mining resources like Python (Stewart 2015; 2017, page 258-9). I originally intended to visit the Library of Congress for full access to the archive of tweets, but they are not accepting researchers at the time of this study (personal communication, 2017), nor can I pay a hefty price for over one million tweets and establish my own archive as I am a graduate student living paycheck to paycheck. Thus, a full archival review or archive building of tweets as well as a statistical analysis of audiences could have provided the generalizability that this project falls short of.

For the sake of this study, I think that achieving “thick description” (Geertz 1973) will be of more value in generating questions and theories of how creative fans and fans’ digital labor are being mined for everyday value and have shifted to the gig economy. Indeed, triangulating multiple methods within a digital ethnography approach through a qualitative framework allows me to provide extensive research on the interaction of social media cultures and everyday life that numbers cannot account for. For instance, in the few research studies on Patreon, they are concerned with how much each creator is

making and how much fans are donating over time (Regner, 2020). Although this research is important, it misses the everyday working conditions and relational strategies that creators have to engage with to earn that crowdfunded income. Additionally, my empirical chapters take seriously how media content is produced and personalized for fans, which statistical analysis or survey analysis may fall short of doing. In this regard, I am able to achieve the thick description and rigorous qualitative research to interrogate the relational labor practices of creators. In future research, I, collaborators, or others might wish to investigate how mixed methods approaches to ethnography or ethnographies might be fruitful in the fields of audience of fan studies, communication studies, internet studies, and gender, women, and sexuality studies. My next chapter will discuss the Pokémon GO YouTube influencers and how they built their fame and brand on the platform. Furthermore, chapter three will look at the various commodification of relational practices and how they impacted the creation of personalized media production for the fans.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Always On ‘Em All: The Essentials of PokéTube Influencers**

#### **Introduction**

What are the various strategies creators deploy to become famous on a platform? How do content creators after achieving fame maintain attention, personalized production, and flexibility? This chapter builds on extant literature on internet celebrity by focusing on the Pokémon GO Phenomenon and famous PokéTubers who became influencers and their various relational strategies. Prior to discussing the successful influencers, I untangle the importance of failure in relation to virality and online fame. Why would a content creator with such a novel idea of traveling the world to capture Pokémon fail? In order to answer the aforesaid questions, I draw from Crystal Abidin’s watershed work that defines four essential qualities of a successful Internet celebrity—exclusivity, exceptionalism, exoticism, and everydayness (2018). Each of my sections for this chapter looks at each of Abidin’s terms but adds to her work by thinking through each quality through relational labor and cross-platform use of Pokémon GO influencers. Indeed, I extend Abidin’s analysis of exceptionalism and everydayness exhibited by PokéTubers by arguing that this exceptionalism is highlighted via cross-platform use. Additionally, I add a fifth quality that I believe to be vital to becoming an internet celebrity—flexibility. I use flexibility term to think through influencers who must be able to migrate platforms or hold dual access (akin to citizenship, but not quite at the time of writing this dissertation given current platform politics and registration policies) and abide by each platforms’ rules. I add to these concepts throughout the chapter by bringing the Pokémon GO influencers into conversation with cross platform engagement and

neoliberal modes of work and precarity. Although a creator does not necessarily need to embody all of the aforesaid, these qualities in tandem with relational labor strategy and

In this chapter, I argue that successful PokéTubers highlight the need to possess several qualities of internet celebrity, but also remain flexible and maintain popularity on multiple platforms in order to follow the personalized demands of the audience. For instance, PokéTubers began going live in 2017 and 2018 in order to engage their audience and also prepared to migrate to Twitch for all their livestreaming work.

YouTube and Twitch both revolve around an attention-based economy and even though these influencers gained fame, they still had to utilize a personality trait or previous work or educational experience to capitalize on their content. Finally, it is important to showcase that most of the Pokémon GO influencers were white or in predominantly English-speaking countries even though the Pokémon franchise originates from Japan and has its own network of influencers. Moreover, as the largest gathering of Pokémon GO players, the annual Pokémon GO Fest is always held in the United States and requires folks around the world to travel to Chicago, Illinois for exclusive content and a chance to meet up with their favorite content creator and be a cameo in one of their videos or streams.



**Figure 3.1:** An image of Mystic7 (also known as Brandon Martyn) in Santa Monica, California.

When I first started watching Pokémon GO videos, I stumbled upon Mystic7. Mystic7 is also known as Brandon and never played any Pokémon game in the franchise prior to July 6, 2016. Brandon began his career on YouTube at 17-years-old in 2014 with his videos being mostly about *Clash of Clans*, a free-to-play mobile tower defense game. Brandon has lived in various cities of California throughout his YouTube career. On his Twitter and Discord servers, Brandon identifies as a white, cisgender man who strongly supports capitalism and thinks communism is the worst economic system. Mystic7 has a net worth of 1.5million dollars, which was mostly produced through Pokémon GO YouTube videos, sponsorships from Pokémon and Niantic, and Mystic7 branded merchandise (Julian, 2021). Brandon's videos overall were exciting, and it was engaging to see someone without any Pokémon experience be so successful at the game. Brandon



was not the only content producer who became viral and I will tell their stories throughout this chapter.

From July 2016 through July 2017, several YouTubers began producing vlogs that detailed walkthroughs, community meetups, and live streams of Pokémon GO. For clarity, throughout this chapter, I use the words Pokémon GO YouTubers, PokéTubers, internet celebrity, and influencers interchangeably as the categories are porous. These PokéTubers mostly resided within the United States and European Union. Much like other influencers, such as fashion or fitness, PokéTubers connect with their audience across social media platforms. Since the release of Pokémon GO was filled with bugs or glitches, these creators gave a sigh of relief and access to gameplay to many audience members, including the author, that we did not have. PokéTubers showed their viewers how to capture elusive Pokémon and how to make the best use of our in-game time. These modes of efficiency link to the overall platformization of everyday life and cultural production. This platformization of everyday life, as Nieborg and Poell describe, revolves around organizations like YouTube or Twitch treating their workers as self-employed and reducing revenue-based frictions (2018). In other words, platforms take a percentage of profit (YouTube is usually 30 percent of ad-based revenue) in exchange for providing “freedom” around content produced. This freedom of being able to produce what one wants and the possibility of becoming an influencer and gaining corporate sponsorships conceals the various levels of monetary extraction as platforms like YouTube charge a percentage for each form of revenue, the inability to quell harassment, and the lack of social benefits like a retirement plan. Over the course of the following years, these PokéTubers would become cultural or brand ambassadors and be sponsored by Niantic

and The Pokémon Company International. Some of these creators became viral, but what does going viral or virality actually entail?

Virality is often happenstance and tied to a combination of content being original, timely, and unique in nature. For instance, virality often occurs if something provokes a strong emotional reaction such as an uncontrollable laughter or crying (Leonhardt, 2015). Often times, one person will like this and share it to friends, but then that content will then be curated to other folks. The more folks that engage with a blooming viral content, the larger the chance of the general public seeing that video. This is essentially part of an “algorithmic practices” (Bucher, 2017, 88). The content essentially strikes a chord with the audience that elicits a strong affective response, but it can also be delayed. Sometimes content takes weeks, if not years, to go viral. Scholarship outside Crystal Abidin and Tania Bucher’s work is limited on how virality occurs. Besides a strong or intense affective response, having a large following base already, and user engaged patterns, virality seems to be up to chance.

This chapter begins with an overview of influencer culture on YouTube to ground the various visibility and attention economies that exist on the platform. As a platform and given the data collection period from 2016 through 2018, YouTube primarily relied on uploaded, edited videos in order for folks to build an audience. Before focusing on successful influencers, I detail the story of a failed influencer who had a novel idea of traveling the world to capture Pokémon. Throughout this chapter, I distinguish successful and failed influencers based on their ability to gain sponsorship from Niantic or The Pokémon Company International, if not both. I am not necessarily concerned with how many views, likes, or shares that a video had, but rather if the creator was successful in

gaining corporate sponsorship *with* a large following. The aforesaid two requirements are what I consider to be a successful Pokémon GO influencer throughout this chapter. I then move on to discuss the successful influencers in relation to Abidin's four qualities of internet celebrity. I build on Abidin's qualities by showcasing how each of the influencers are interacting with relational labor strategies that grounds much of this dissertation work. My next section then discusses the flexible creator in which I briefly look at influencers' ability to migrate from one platform to another as well as maintain a strong following across platforms, which is essential for their revenue. I propose that "flexibility" is the fifth quality that every internet celebrity or influencer must obtain as platforms are precarious employments and have ever changing policies around moderation and governance. As discussed briefly in earlier chapters and discussed in my next chapter, creators can be forced to leave a platform if their policies around the type of content, particularly not safe for work content, changes. Thus, this flexibility is vital in the ever-lasting success of creators after the initial virality.

This chapter demonstrates how content creators became viral, maintained popularity, and built their brand. I rely on theories of internet celebrity that is developed extensively by Crystal Abidin. I expand on the work of what qualities make an internet celebrity or influencer throughout this chapter by relying on the cognitive process behind relational labor practices. I wrap up by thinking how creators must always embody a type of flexibility in order to migrate and use multiple platforms. Creators are always under intense neoliberal mandates of work and labor extraction. The mandates of work indeed revolve around the individual because all creators are self-employed on YouTube. Not only is the individual the most important unit, but how the individual uses their time to

build their order and produce highly demanded Pokémon content is crucial. By labor extraction, I am referring to the cognitive process that relationality requires in order to build strong relations with one's fans while also providing deliverables. Here, I rely on what Brooke Erin Duffy has called aspirational labor in which creators are always thinking about their next product or sponsorship (2017). I extend Duffy's concept as it is deeply enmeshed with relationality. The influencers in this chapter all exhibit qualities of internet celebrity such as being relatable on the everyday level or providing exclusive, one-of-a-kind content. Influencers in Pokémon GO are able to be authentic and provide personalized content for their audience. My next section looks at Influencer culture on YouTube and the various attention and visibility based economies of the platform.

### **Influencer Culture on YouTube: Visibility, Attention, & Mental Health**

Gaining views on YouTube generally revolves around a general user's past view history, playlists, and platform recommendations, which are determined by algorithmic design. Algorithms work to provide suggestions on what content a viewer might like based on previous viewership and similarly organized content. Algorithms are "a structured sequence of steps that create an output from an input through the mechanical application of a series of operations..." (Berry and Fagerjord, 2017, 47). In this vein, algorithms determine what viewers will be suggested to watch next via autoplay feature or through additional suggested videos on the right side of the web browser. This ultimately acts as a mode of affording or restricting visibility and attention to various creators and tends to harm newer creators who do not have an established audience. In other words, algorithms often determine unequal access to resources and views for content creators (Eubanks, 2017). Indeed, algorithms serve as an automated, cognitive

process not only for the platform but for creators, who must negotiate and take advantage of algorithms? (van Dijck, 2013; Burgess and Green, 2009). For example, creators are constantly in the mindset of, “is this video kid-friendly?” as if it is not, a tick-box must be checked, which reduces potential viewership. Creators must also constantly consider how their videos relate to other popular, successful content on the platform. Creators are always thinking how to garner the most attention and traffic for their videos as well as planning future content for their subscribers that will contribute additional revenue.



**Figure 3.2:** Mystic7 attempting to capture a legendary, shiny Articuno in Pokémon GO (July 2018).

YouTube functions based on an attention economy of views, likes, and subscriptions. In Figure 3.2, a screenshot of a video of Mystic7 shows him attempting to capture a legendary and shiny Articuno in Pokémon GO. Legendary Pokémon are extremely strong and often event-based, which makes them a limited time occurrence

within the game. Shiny Pokémon are a different color than usual and are often an extremely rare encounter; in Pokémon GO, during events only, finding a shiny colored Pokémon is usually 1 in 500 or 0.2 percent.

As of writing this dissertation, Mystic7 is the most popular Pokémon GO influencer based on having the most subscribers; throughout this research Mystic7 has always had the most subscribers on their YouTube channel. Mystic7 was the first Pokémon GO influencer to hit over 1million subscribers on his YouTube channel and be invited as a co-host for the First Annual Pokémon GO Fest in 2017 in Chicago, Illinois. To date, he has 2.07million subscribers on YouTube. Mystic7 often provides exclusive content where he travels the world to capture Pokémon in popular tourist spots like the Eiffel Tower or Leaning Tower of Pisa. Mystic7 has started several initiatives for mental health beginning in 2018 and has a Discord, voice chat, and instant messaging platform for gamers, for his fans to reach out personally to him about social anxiety. His content beginning in late 2017 primarily focused on shiny and legendary Pokémon hunting.

Shiny and Legendary Pokémon are a fan-favorite and are usually the most popular content one can upload for a lot of video views and likes. The title of the video also aids in what is called clickbait, which attempts to get views by having a catchy title. However, comments on the video were quick to note that capturing a shiny legendary Pokémon as pictured in Figure 3.6 is a 100 percent guarantee and one cannot fail. Regardless of the video being clickbait or genuine, it still did its job in garnering attention with over 500,000 views. As such, and particularly on YouTube and most social media platforms, attention becomes money (Goldhaber, 1997). As most folks who watch YouTube are familiar with the “like and subscribe” at the end of each video, this echoes the need that

attention is a requirement in order to be successful and profitable on the platform. Creators can earn money in several ways. Views are important because the most common way of making money is through YouTube's advertising program (Burgess and Green, 2009). For instance, 500,000 views on a video ensure that several thousands of viewers will click on an ad and that will be logged as profit for the creator. Mystic7 also uses the channel membership or subscription feature, which entails personalized or exclusive content for viewers (YouTube, 2021). For a monthly premium, which is usually five U.S. dollars, subscribers of Mystic7 gain exclusive content like badges, custom emojis, and personalized links via email to view videos like the one in Figure 3.6 earlier than everyone else.

Most influencers do not become famous enough to be household names or earn enough money on YouTube like Mystic7. However, their fame is enough within their own community, in this case the Pokémon GO fandom, to garner them brand sponsorship and attention from Niantic and The Pokémon Company International. This chapter is less concerned with the economies of how much each YouTuber makes, but how they navigate the platform's shifting ecologies and embrace various aspects of being famous online. The next section will look at a peculiar case of an aspiring influencer who did not achieve thousands of views and wound up quitting his year-long Pokémon GO expedition. I do this to set-up the four essential qualities of becoming an influencer alongside relational labor to demonstrate how the successful PokéTubers accomplished becoming an Internet celebrity.

## The Failed Influencer: Qualities of Internet Celebrity?



**Figure 3.3:** Colton Robtoy beginning his year-long Pokémon GO around the world challenge in Manaus, Brazil.

In June 2017, self-proclaimed American “coach” Colton Robtoy (figure 3.3) began a unique goal of travelling 12 countries and 36 cities for a year in order to capture at least 60 unique Pokémon in each country and visit 30 different Pokéstops from each city (Luz, 2017). In an interview, Colton explains that he chose to visit a well-known city in each country and that his choice for Brazil was Rio de Janeiro. For his other locations (figure 3.4), Colton asserted that he chose Manaus because “it was in the middle of the Amazon and I chose Cuiaba because I wanted to get to know a city halfway between Manaus and Rio. I looked at the map and Cuiaba appeared. I didn’t research anything about Cuiaba” (Luz, 2017). In this section, I argue that having novel idea is not enough to achieve virality and influencer status on YouTube. This section explores Robtoy’s attempt at funding a world-wide Pokémon GO trip in order to become an influencer. By



doing this, I set the scene for later discussions of why Robtoy failed in comparison to the qualities and relational labor strategies he did not deploy for his potential fans.

In order to fund this lengthy and expensive trip, Colton began purchasing the first generation of Snapchat Spectacles and selling them at a higher price. In December 2016 and early 2017, the first generation of Snapchat Spectacles were only available at select pop-up stores with hour long wait times. For 129.99 USD, the Snapchat Spectacles were able to connect to Snapchat, post Snaps, and record a ten second video while protecting you from the sun. Because supply was limited and each customer was limited to two purchases per day, Colton visited multiple locations on the east coast in order to purchase the maximum allotment each day. He re-sold them on Facebook marketplace for upwards of 250 USD (personal communication, 2016). Once he had enough funds to support a portion of his trip, he posted a schedule on Twitter about his upcoming journey.

This aforesaid opening context for Colton Robtoy provides a post-colonial sensibility. Borrowing Lisa Nakamura's description of "colonial trophy-getting" (2002) as a way of "eating the Other," the modes of selecting cities as simply looking at a map and doing no research stems from an ability to seamlessly travel borders without repercussions. Furthermore, Robtoy is literally going to capture and tame Pokémon that are native or exclusively in the game within specific regions of the world. Although Pokémon GO is inherently about capturing and taming wild monsters, the colonial aspect is heightened when going abroad to capture Pokémon instead of waiting for events or trading with people via friend passes. Moreover, referencing Nakamura's "colonial trophy-getting," Robtoy selected the locations because they were appealing or "exotic" to visit (Luz, 2017). Although Pokémon GO is an augmented reality game, the process of

traveling for the sake of capturing as many Pokémon and visiting as many landmarks as possible heavily resonates with colonial tendencies of extracting resources from the mother country in order to benefit one's own career. Without much regard for the population currently living in these locations Robtoy was attempting to extract resources from these cities via tourism that will eventually bolster him to virality or influencer status; however, this extraction of resources for virality did not result in achieving influencer or celebrity status. Colton cut his trip short and stopped recording in July 2017 because he lacked the funds to continue. He deleted all his social media accounts related to the event and embark on a new adventure.



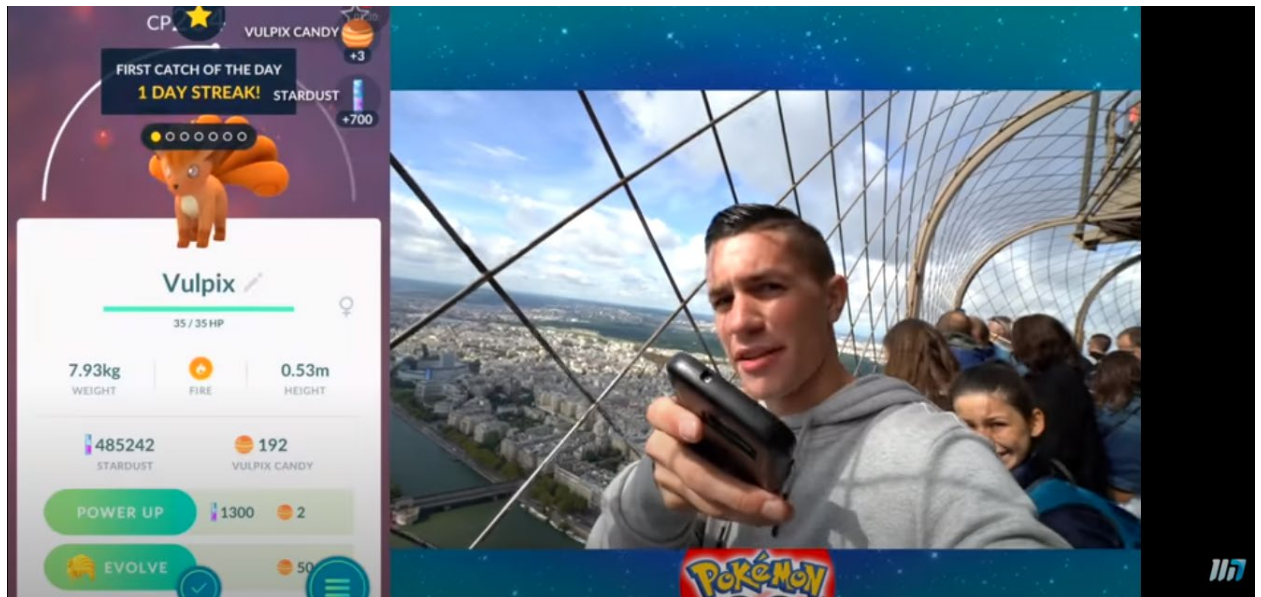
**Figure 3.4:** A Screenshot of Colton Robtoy's one-year schedule for playing Pokémon GO around the world.

What exactly went wrong for Colton? Was the planning and content not original and strategic? Prior to beginning his trip, Colton created a YouTube channel and Twitter, in a similar fashion to the PokéTubers who became influencers. Having these social platforms prepared so that the moment he went viral, he would be able to build up an audience for his content and attempt to solicit sponsorships from Niantic and other brands. Virality is often happenstance and tied to a combination of content being original, timely, and unique in nature. Here, Robtoy's downfall was the extensive planning, which is not a necessary quality of becoming an influencer or internet celebrity. In figure 3.4, Colton had a whole 365-day trip planned out, but the funds after the first two months were dependent on becoming famous (personal communication, 2017). The extensive planning had no resonance with the audience and users could not necessarily engage with such a rigid plan because there was no room for edits or audience interaction. Although devoted, Robtoy's videos never received more than a few hundred views and thus never had the chance to become viral before being removed.

I am highlighting the story of an aspiring influencer who failed because it merits attention to what Crystal Abidin has defined as four major, celebrated qualities of internet celebrity: exclusivity, exoticism, exceptionalism, or everydayness. These qualities can generate a specific form of capital that blends monetary needs with interest and attention, “whether positive (i.e. out of admiration or love) or negative (i.e. out of disgust or judgment)” (Abidin, 2018, 19). As I have highlighted in this section, the failure of this one particular aspiring influencer emphasizes he was not adhering to a specific method where his audience felt compelled or engaged to watch his content. Although Robtoy's content could be considered exotic at the time with the consumption of other cultures, his

content did not provide an everydayness or exclusive personalization that other successful PokéTubers did. Robtoy planned everything out to a strategic point thinking that the audience would be happy to follow along; however, Robtoy did not have a large following to begin with. Additionally, the rigid scheduling precluded building relational ties with the audience by soliciting their input for travel locations. He did not have the affluence to begin his journey to becoming famous by partaking on a monumental excursion around the world. Thus, in my following section, I will parse out each category Abidin has laid forth and its relation to a specific type of quality embodied by the PokéTubers. It is not necessarily the case that an internet celebrity possesses all four of these; however, within the famous PokéTubers community, these qualities are quite porous and all influencers within the Pokémon GO community use relational labor strategies to build friendly ties with their audience.

### **The Successful Influencer: Cross Platform Use, Labor, & Relationality**



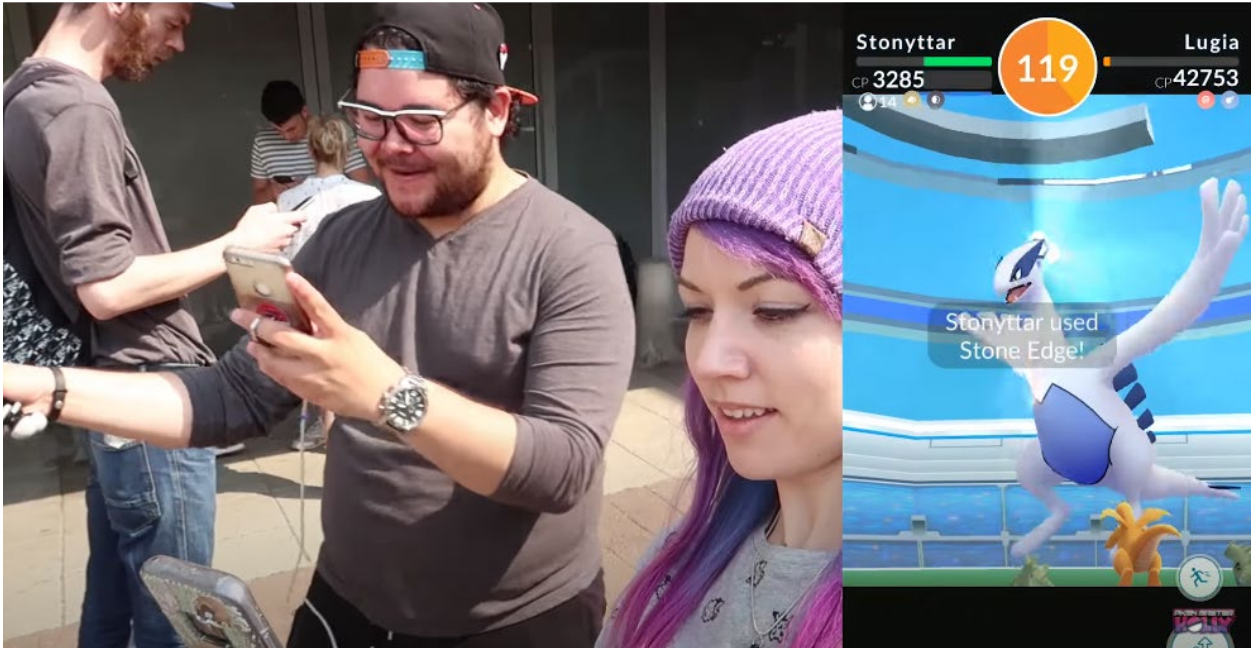
**Figure 3.5:** Mystic7 capturing a Vulpix on the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France; September 2017.

How were PokéTubers able to maintain relevance after the initial popularity of Pokémon GO waned? This section explores these questions by interrogating the various relational labor strategies, such as responding directly to comments or uploading exclusive content, that the successful influencers engaged. I rely on Abidin's four qualities of internet celebrity but expand her thought by thinking through cross platform use and relational labor that showcases each influencer's ability. Moreover, this section shows various labor engagements that PokéTubers showcase in order to gain corporate sponsorship, such as being part of the exclusive Pokémon Travel 2018 campaign.

PokeTubers often will provide insightful tips to capturing Pokémon, but rarely will they visit unique locations that will have their fans enticed. However, when they do, the PokéTubers are bringing exclusive content that feeds into maintaining the audience's attention. Abidin defines Internet celebrity that is exclusive as "the glamorization and celebration of practices and possessions so elite in access" (2018, 20). The glamorization often entails that one has access to certain financial resources that others do not. For instance, and in figure 3.5, we see Mystic7 capturing a Vulpix on the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France. Although Vulpix can be found anywhere in the world and is not exclusive to the European Union or France, in general, it is also that Mystic7 is able to bring his audience to the Eiffel Tower and is able to showcase how Pokémon GO exists in Paris while also having champagne at the top of the tower. This aura of exclusivity is something most viewers and content creators will be able to achieve and does the intimate work of building relationships with one's audience (Baym, 2018). Viewers who play Pokémon GO will not have access to purchase a plane ticket and hotel room and then travel to the Eiffel Tower to capture a Pokémon. Viewers and content creators who

do not have a type of affluence already do not get to engage in exclusive moments. As such, Mystic7 brings his audience with him on his journey to capturing Pokémon and the first recorded Pokémon caught at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Even though other people who live in Paris probably have done the same thing, they do not have a platform like Mystic7 to actually garner that kind of attention and hype. This exclusivity echoes to the attention economy that is so prevalent on YouTube and even though viewers and other content creators cannot do what Mystic7 can, they aspire to. This aspiration deludes from exclusivity to other viewers and non-famous creators because if one does this, perhaps one can be famous as well.

This exclusivity is bound in a type of relationality that is part and parcel of aspirational labor and future-oriented thinking that Brooke Erin Duffy has argued. In this sense, exclusivity is always coupled with cognitive thoughts for influencers to ask their audience: what should I capture next? Where should I go? As well as internal, aspirational thoughts: Will this land me a sponsorship with Niantic? Will I be able to partner with a brand like GFuel (energy drink for gamers) to provide discounts for my fans? This future-oriented logic is to keep fans enticed with potential content creation that is decided by them and for them (Duffy, 2017). For the famous PokéTubers, this kind of aspirational labor is mandated in order to maintain one's fame and expand one's income.



**Figure 3.6:** PkmnMasterHolly, Reversal, and TrainerTips (not pictured) participating in a Lugia Raid in Arnhem, Netherlands as part of a PokéTubers collaboration trip (August 2017).

Also, part of exclusivity is a collaboration among other influencers. It seems once there are a set number of influencers it becomes difficult to break into that niche market. Figure 3.6 shows PkmnMasterHolly, Reversal, and TrainerTips (not pictured; holding the camera) participating in a Legendary Lugia raid in Arnhem, Netherlands. This was part of a Euro-trip collaboration series between these three Pokémon influencers in order for unique and common fans across the three content creators could view this on each of their channels. Starting almost a year after the other influencers, PkmnMasterHolly (also known as Holly) achieved fame relatively quickly. She was based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania until moving to Las Vegas, Nevada in late 2018. Holly enjoyed doing community-based videos as well as when becoming famous, collaborating with other influencers like Reversal, who is described below. Her personality for being very candid with her audience allowed her to become part of the Pokémon GO Travel team in 2018, which was a group of Pokémon GO Influencers that traveled the world to capture

Pokémon and engage with the local culture. Holly prided her content on showcasing well-shot augmented reality photos with Pokémon in their natural habitats. Although not as popular as Mystic7 or TrainerTips, with over 150,000 YouTube subscribers, Holly is also popular on Twitter, Instagram, and the live streaming platform Twitch. Reversal is another Pokémon Go influencer who is a cross-platform YouTube and Twitch user who is based in the Netherlands. Reversal is a 32-years-old cisgender man and has been a Pokémon fan for most of their life. Their uploaded, edited content around Pokémon GO walkthroughs, gameplay and community meetups are uploaded exclusively to YouTube, whereas their Pokémon GO team raids and non-Pokémon related games are livestreamed on Twitch as of 2018. With over 300,000 subscribers and a funny personality, Reversal was known as one of the players with the most experience and Pokémon eggs hatched in-game.

This kind of collaboration is exclusive because it allows fans to engage with multiple creators or influencers at the same time and potentially garners larger followers for the creators. As mentioned earlier, Colton Robtoy was not successful even with his novel idea of traveling the world. Robtoy did not collaborate with other influencers, which might have led to his premature YouTube career coming to an end. Collaboration is important to the idea of exclusivity because it brings viewers who may only watch one channel (Reversal) to watch another influencer's channel (PkmnMasterHolly). Collaboration is a relational labor strategy because audiences are able to see their favorite influencers together and being their authentic self. Since Robtoy did not collaborate with other influencers or even other Pokémon GO small-scale (not famous) YouTubers, the audience could have perceived his Pokémon GO trip not as novel, but as fake. Fake in



terms of merely a gimmick in order to attract a large following base without actually being engaged or building friendly ties with the audience.



**Figure 3.7:** ZoeTwoDots using advanced augmented reality photo taking in-game to capture a Magikarp and then lining up a fishing net attempt to mimic a real-life capturing experience to the audience (July 2017).

Pokémon GO does not require a lot of skill to play and is accessible to those who have not played video games before. In other words, the learning curve for Pokémon GO is relatively small and one can be adequate enough within 15 minutes of gameplay. In that time, one will learn how to capture Pokémon on the screen, complete tasks by spinning Pokéstops and walking to hatch eggs, and participate in gym battles or collective raid battles with other players outside. Although the former is relatively simple, there are more complex skills to be learned, such as taking extraordinary, augmented reality pictures and videos as seen in figure 3.7 or throwing consecutive great or excellent curveballs to capture a Pokémon each time. This is where a simple in-game tutorial is not enough and where famous PokéTubers step up to assist the everyday player.

My opening gambit for a specific skill set leads into the second quality of being an internet celebrity—exceptionalism. Abidin defines Internet celebrity that is exceptional as “highlight[ing] the unusual abilities, astounding qualities, or expert skills of a person that can be elite or mundane in nature but are spectacular and admired for their ‘technical capital.’” (2018, 29). Abidin highlights that one’s exceptional characteristics can come from their background or work as well as the mundane becoming suddenly lucrative and valuable as a skillset. Although the skillset that PokéTubers possess seems simple, their thousands of views and commentary from the audience suggests this content is successful in building their technical capital. Zoe’s technical capital allows her to appeal uniquely to her fans across multiple platforms. Not only does figure 3.7 and figure 3.8 showcase Zoe’s ability to play the game, but it also illustrates how Zoe is able to produce a simulation of the game for her audience with real-life events such as fishing a Magikarp, which echoes how a gamer would capture one prior to Pokémon GO. Zoe’s exceptional talent coupled with her cross-platform use. She tweets about a new upcoming video and then uploads it on YouTube. Additionally, there are surprises within the video and tweets that informs her audience on how to enter a contest to win exclusive, limited-edition merchandise from her store. This demonstrates why she is a successful influencer and has partnered with Niantic.



**Figure 3.8:** ZoeTwoDots showing her fans her pixel art skillset and her merchandise store.

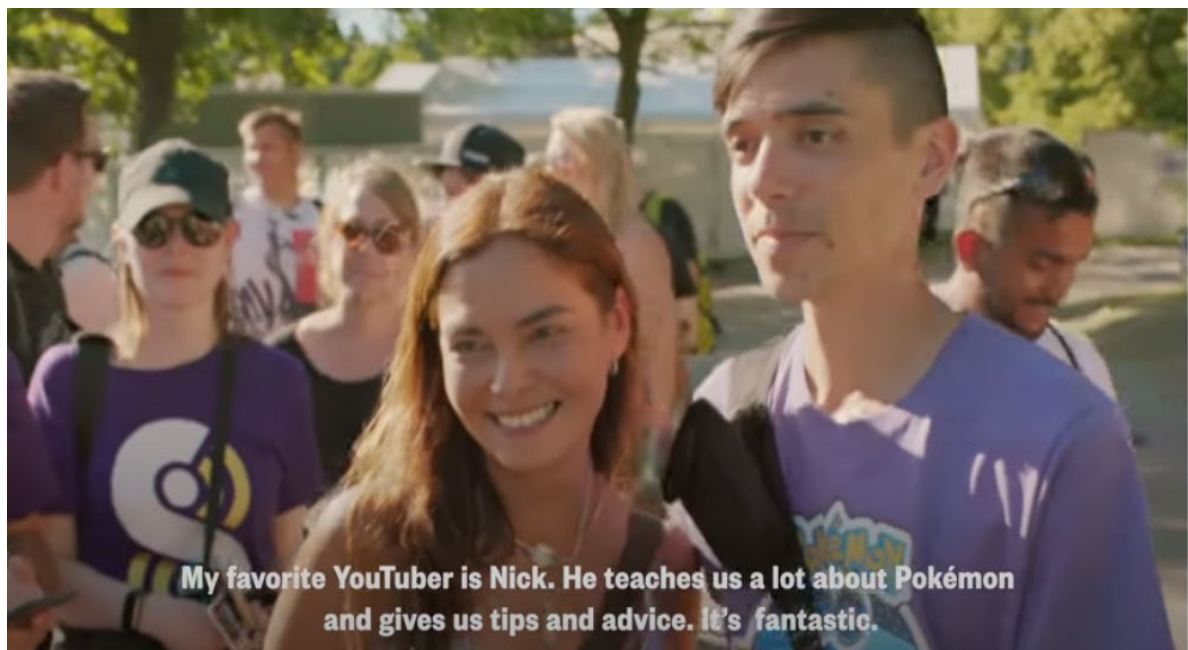
Zoe can take her main exceptional skill set as a graphic designer and photographer and apply it to her Pokémon GO content across platforms. ZoeTwoDots used her graphic design background and skillset to create pixel art banners, overlays to use in her videos, and discusses traveling as she is the only influencer in this chapter to come from Australia. Like Holly, Zoe was invited to the 2018 Pokémon GO Fest in Chicago, Illinois, and has traveled the world with the Pokémon GO Travel team. Zoe's content primarily focuses on personalized pixel artwork. She blends her working day, surrounding environment with the advanced augmented reality photo capturing system, and Pokémon catching attempts within a 10-minute segment. To date, Zoe has over 180,000 YouTube subscribers and constantly updates her merchandise and pins shop with seasonal designs.



**Figure 3.9:** Mystic7 capturing the regional exclusive Corsola in Miami, Florida in Pokémon GO (May 2017).

Furthermore, the type of exceptionalism is also highlighted in how to play the game efficiently in specific regions. Pokémon GO is a game that many folks and commentators suggest they play during their free time, including the author of this dissertation. In Pokémon, there are not only regional exclusive Pokémon, but also Pokémon that can be captured within certain longitudes and latitudes such as Corsola, the Coral Pokémon, pictured in figure 3.9. In figure 3.9, Mystic7 is showcasing the best spots to use one's time effectively while trying to hunt this elusive Pokémon. In his video, Mystic7 comments that the best place to find Corsola is at a beach or near any body of water because Corsola will not appear in grassy terrains or within downtown areas. This type of skill set is what Abidin would consider mundane, but not everyone knows what are the most populous or efficient areas to hunt. As such, and extending Abidin's point, someone who gives a detailed walkthrough so one can play more effectively and use their time accordingly is seen as helpful and a specific marketable skill.

Cross-platform use is the posting a snippet of one's YouTube content, in this scenario, on Twitter or Instagram to highlight one's skillset and garner attention for continued viewership and sponsorship across social media sites. Referencing figure 3.9, Zoe tells her audience in the YouTube video to use the hashtag #ProfessorTwoDots on Twitter to showcase their augmented reality photos of Tauros because it was an in-game Pokémon GO event. From that, Zoe suggests that she will select a winner and send a customized merchandise piece to them. This will usually be mentioned on YouTube and then her fans will follow Zoe's Twitter and re-tweet or use the hashtag provided in order to receive a customized merchandise that is currently on rotation in her shop. Again, the blending of a specific skillset along with cross-platform posting allows Zoe to maintain the attention of her audience and promote her content. Furthermore, it allows Zoe to reach a larger audience and be seen as more relational. It also allowed Zoe along with the other influencers mentioned to partake on the Pokémon GO Travel campaign in 2018.





**Figure 3.10:** A Pokémon GO Travel campaign where fans could buy clothing with all their favorite PokéTubers and be linked directly to each PokéTuber's personal shop.

I turn my focus here to analyze the 2018 Pokémon GO Travel campaign to highlight the exoticism and English-speaking dominance behind the weeklong excursion. Echoing back to Nakamura's work and the failed influencer discussed earlier, what makes this campaign different? What is the cultural work being done when all the influencers appear to be white or white-passing (Bishop, 2018, 2020)? Indeed, figure 3.10 demonstrates how each creator, in this example TrainerTips (Nick), would have a meet and greet with their fans while visiting each country. TrainerTips (also known as TrnrTips, Nick, or Nicholas Oyzon) was living in a van prior to becoming famous and travelling the world recording and producing Pokémon GO content (Trasher, 2017). In 2017, prior to the Pokémon GO travel campaign he had his own meet-and-greet area in the Bay area of California where lines were up to 30 minutes long in order to snag a picture with him (Trasher, 2017). In 2017, he reached over 600,000 YouTube subscribers and to date he has 970,000 subscribers. Nick is the only influencer who self-identifies as multi-racial, but also does not wish to discuss race or politics on his YouTube platform. However, on his Twitter account, Nick is a supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement and often tweets in support of the protests. In this vein, exoticism gets coded as to make the audience comfortable and fall within the confines of YouTube's attention economy for views and profit. It also creates a stark difference of how influencers can act on certain platforms. YouTube is a place where fans are watching longer videos that range from five to 15 minutes, whereas Twitter is real-time, quick response to events. These platforms convey different messages and as such have influencers being flexible

for their audience, which I will discuss the politics of flexibility in greater length throughout the last section of this chapter.

In 2017 and 2018, there were two Pokémon GO Travel campaigns in which the aforesaid influencers were invited to partake in. Pokémon Go advertised this campaign as

a series of tours taking in exotic destinations all over the globe. Each tour will see a team of selected Trainers given the chance to discover new places, meet new people and do battle in far-away gyms. The lucky few on the ground will be joined by the global community through challenges delivered in-app and via social channels. These challenges will give players all over the world the chance to unlock rewards and catch rare Pokémon characters (Niantic, 2018).

The framing of the exotic also links to the origins of Pokémon being created and distributed in Japan. Furthermore, Yamada (figure 3.11) is the only influencer, who was not analyzed for this chapter, from Japan who is interviewed and highlighted throughout the campaign. Yamada is a 30-year-old YouTuber from Itabashi, Tokyo who produces all content in Japanese and has been a life-long Pokémon fan. Outside of Pokémon GO YouTube videos, they are a comedian. With the advent of Pokémon GO, they were able to create Pokémon GO content that was funny and helpful to the community in Tokyo and abroad. Indeed, Yamada says, “[I] think it is a miracle for me to be able to make a living by doing something that I love...if my younger self could see me now, he would be proud” (Pokémon GO, 2018).



**Figure 3.11:** Yamada, a Japanese influencer, being highlighted in Episode 4 of Pokémon GO Travel.

This highlights another quality of a successful Internet celebrity of exoticism. Exoticism is defined as being “perceived as distancing far removed from one's comfort zone or so novel or foreign data piques the interest of audiences who hold contrasting or different forms of cultural capital” (22). Here, it is imperative to think through the cultural gaps that form between the audience, the creator, and the corporate-sponsored campaign. Abidin locates exoticism within the creator for the audience to consume, which would suggest that Yamada being in the native location of where Pokémon was created would be enticing. However, that is not the case for this particular example, and I extend this quality of exoticism to also incorporate the creator or influencer consuming the native culture of specific geographical locations. For instance, after the aforesaid influencers were tapped to essentially become cultural ambassadors for Pokémon GO, there is a distance away from the main location to the consumption and sedition of



content creation where influencers meet local fans, visit tour sites, and then leave for their next adventure to capture and tame the local Pokémon. My next section will analyze how relationality is built through the quality of everydayness and providing limited-edition merchandise.

### Building Relationality through Everydayness Merchandise



**Figure 3.12:** PkmnMasterHolly highlighting her catch for the Dratini Pokémon GO Community Day event in February 2018.

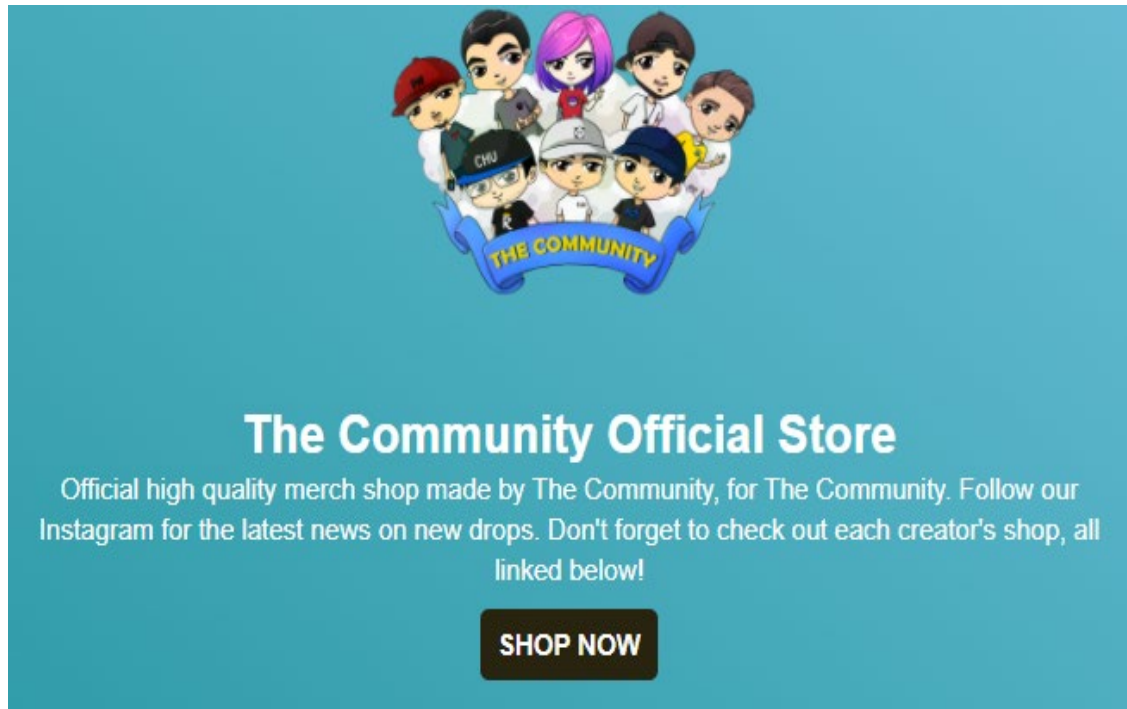
Finally, and perhaps the most important quality of a successful influencer, is the ability to simultaneously embody and connect to the everyday layperson as well as commodify this through merchandise. Crystal Abidin defines the everyday as

capital [here] refers to the assets arising from stable networks of relationships between people, organizations, or institutions, through acknowledged membership within these groups...Over time, this sense of familiarity and trust allows everyday internet celebrities to promote other persons, products, or services through personal recommendations and endorsements (2018, 32-33).

In figure 3.12, Holly is highlighting her Community Day experience with capturing a fan-favorite Pokémon, Dratini that evolves into Dragonair and Dragonite (pictured right to

left). Community Day is an in-game event in Pokémon GO where one specific Pokémon has increased spawn rates and a 1 in 65 chance to be shiny instead of the normal 1 in 500 for two hours. Furthermore, if the Community Day Pokémon is caught within that two-hour window it will learn an exclusive, powerful move to be used in gym battles or raid. As such, Community Day in Pokémon usually gathers large crowds around popular cities and a place that has a plethora of Pokéstops to make the most out of the increased spawn rate. Although just an ordinary day playing Pokémon GO, Holly along with other PokéTubers are able to build their social capital with their audience through building a feeling of anticipation about what will be highlighted on their day (Abidin, 2018; Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, the everyday journey mirrors what the audience plays on the daily, which is important for maintaining one's fame and visibility on YouTube.

To be sure, content creators capitalize on this by holding community daily meetups within one central location where they will all sync and then drop incenses, which heavily increases the Pokémon spawn, which further increases the chances of catching a shiny Pokémon. This is an act of collective good in the sense that creators are using their clout to organize and get out a central location of where to meet and where to increase the odds of getting rare Pokémon during the short community day window. Community day is not the only time that the content creators will try to meet up as they will also schedule chances to have a meet and greet with multiple YouTubers during an in-game event or the annual Pokémon GO Fest in Chicago, Illinois.



**Figure 3.13:** A Community Merchandise Store for multiple PokéTubers to sell their personalized brand.

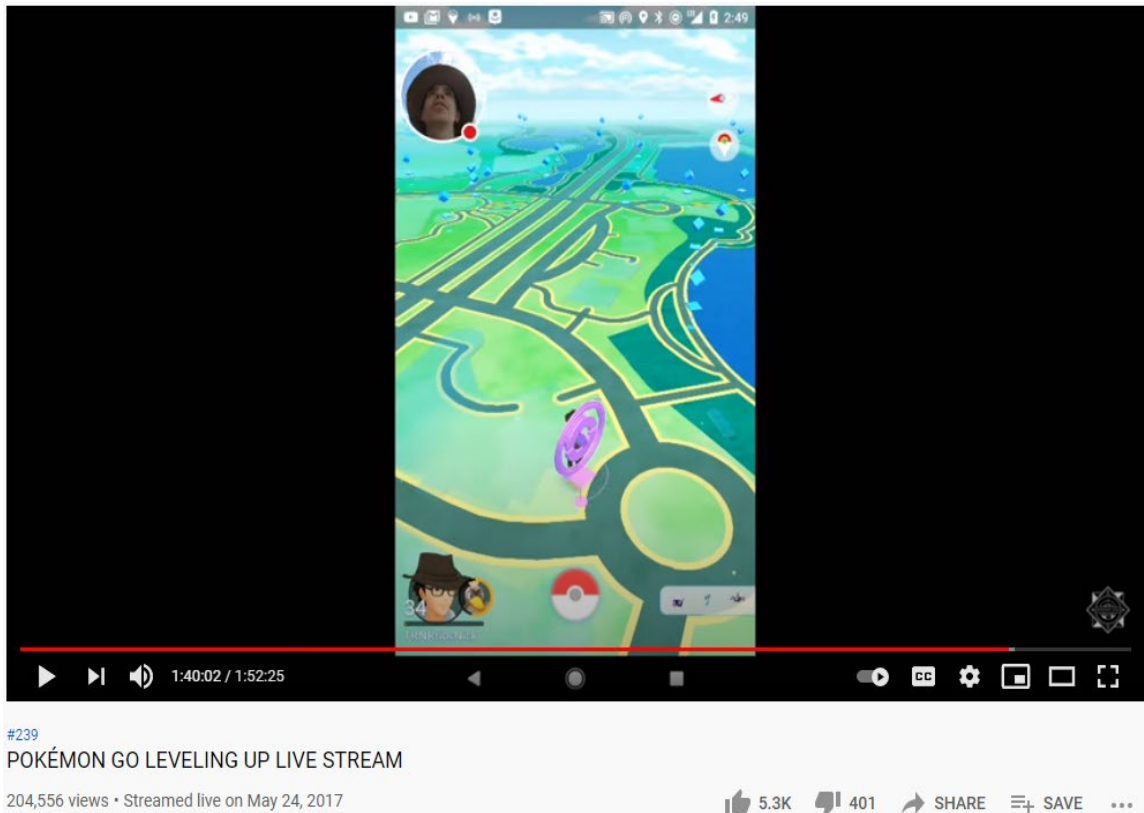
The everyday becomes a mode of building the most authentic connection with one's audience yet is seeped by materiality. Indeed, the relational labor that is enacted by the creator to their audience is usually to connect with them on some personal level and to foster ideas of community through merchandise. Relational labor, as Baym defines it, is the ongoing cognitive and affective work to build relationships with one's audience or fans. Relational labor has been inherently crucial for this chapter in order to think about how the qualities of internet celebrity play out on YouTube. In figure 3.13, we see personalized merchandise from the Pokémon GO Travel excursion discussed in the last section. Since most fans could not travel alongside the influencers or meet their favorite PokéTubers, the influencers made a community store to buy merchandise with all their faces on a shirt or mug as well as hyperlinking to their individual merchandise store. Memorabilia ultimately serves as a way of fostering long-lasting connections with

creators when one is unable to physically meet. Regarding memorabilia, Zoe is unique and exceptional, as mentioned earlier, in that she has her own merchandise store that she exclusively designs and does not outsource the labor. Instead of outsourcing creation, she uses her graphic design experience and lets her audience know on YouTube as well as Twitter about the new items that are available for sale in her store and that they are only going to be for sale for a short amount of time.

As mentioned earlier mental health can often be seen as a negative to discuss when one does not necessarily have the platform already established to garner a generative response. However, the real subsumption of labor (Read, 2003) finds a pathway in which those creators then spin the narrative about mental health. Indeed, creators are then expected to communicate about their previous anxiety, depression, or even suicide attempt in order to spin the past within the grammar of happiness. In turn, this shows how creators were able to overcome their mental health adversity as well as highlight how it was a game like Pokémon GO has helped them overcome anxiety or that Pokémon GO helped them made friends and earn a living. These anxieties expand beyond mental health to encapsulate and commodify one's revenue stream from a platform. Having anxiety is often thought of as a negative side effect from work or past traumas. However, for content creators being candid about one's past mental health struggles is often spun into a positive and can actually amplify one's brand and viewership (Lehto, 2021). Moreover, as we have seen with several of the PokéTubers, their openness about their past mental health struggles or being on the brink of poverty is often approach to show the "real" creator. This showcasing of anxiety for realness works through a neoliberal logic of overcoming one's adversity through hard work and

determination. Here, the negative affect of anxiety is mined for value and self-exposure in order to showcase how one can be productive under duress (Kavka, 2018; Lehto 2021; Berlant, 2008). The power of crying or being on the verge of tears after one has an audience can solidify relational ties and provide an authentic, vulnerable self to viewers (Banet-Weiser 2012); however, this reaffirms how neoliberal logics have shifted work to a type of real subsumption where every piece of one's conscience and lived experiences are marketed. In other words, and referencing to the real subsumption of labor, the social interactions between creators and audience are transformed in that there is commodification of relationality in order to secure viewers and income. My final section proposes that the creator must always be flexible and migrate from platform to platform given a viral trend, potential for more revenue, or have their audience on multiple platforms. I argue that the flexible creator should be considered as an essential quality for being and maintaining one's status as an influencer within current platform infrastructures.

## The New Quality: Flexibility Across Platforms



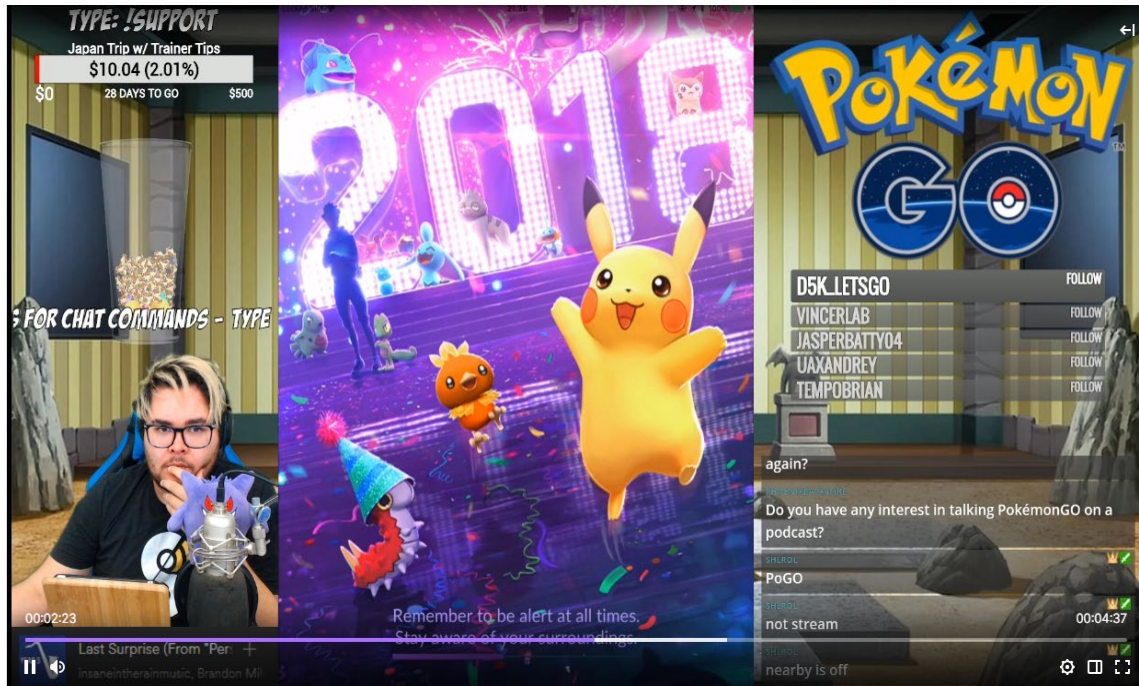
**Figure 3.14:** Archived livestream from TrainerTips on YouTube playing on his phone to show his audience how he levels up in the game (May 2017).

This section suggests that the fifth quality of becoming and maintaining internet celebrity is flexibility. I think through the term flexibility as a type of membership that is akin to thinking through the effects and modes in which platforms govern actions of their creators (Gillespie, 2010, 2018). Flexibility also requires realness in which influencers listen to their audience and their needs, such as wanting livestreams for unedited content and game walkthrough as well as uploaded content for longer viewing sessions. As such, influencers must become flexible subjects and be ready to be on multiple platforms and provide exclusive content to each. I am using the term to describe how content creators have to be prepared to migrate between platforms, like YouTube and Twitch, and

understand the guidelines and monetization between both. In essence, influencers as well as other creators, become workers for multiple distinct platforms. For instance, Twitch has an embargo on any clips or content for the first 24 hours it is streamed or archived on the platform, which means it cannot be cross-posted to YouTube during this time frame (Twitch, 2020). This means that influencers must be aware and think of new strategies to popularize content on both platforms, especially if it is previously viewed content from another platform.

Beginning in mid-2017, PokéTubers began experimenting with going live on the phone with YouTube Live or Facebook live extensions. In figure 3.14, TrainerTips is casually traveling and showing his audience how he is training and leveling up in-game. He lives in a popular urban environment, so he has access to a plethora of Pokéstops and eggs to hatch into new Pokémon and gain experience to level up. During the stream, TrainerTips is able to respond to his audience in real-time, but within this early version of YouTube Live, was not able to make money off the streams via donations or subscriptions. Live streams served as a way for amateur and professional content creators to share real-time, unedited interactions with their audience. Indeed, it allowed for a demystification of the content creation process and embraced realness, mistakes, and comedic moments within content. In 2018, it was revealed that game live streaming, in particular, was extremely lucrative, but only for some.





**Figure 3.15:** Reversal livestreaming on Twitch prior to the 2018 New Year's Celebration and answering audience questions (December 2018).

In 2018, Tyler Blevins (Ninja) confirmed in an CNBC interview that he was making over \$500,000 a month on Twitch.tv by live streaming. Twitch.tv (Twitch) is the premier platform for game live streaming and allows for a more streamlined and more favorable policies towards copyright infringements. For instance, when a YouTube video gets a copyright strike against it, the entire video is taken down and de-monetized; however, when a Twitch video gets a copyright claim only parts of that audio and portion of the clip is muted. As such, Twitch became more hospitable for creators to stream and make money on. Although the average Twitch streamer is casual and as of 2018 had an average of 3 viewers (Taylor, 2018), the platform became salient as a site for garnering large amounts of revenue. In figure 3.15, Reversal is live streaming prior to the 2018 New Year's Celebration event in Pokémon GO. His live streams allow his audience to talk to him in real time and to answer questions about other games or opportunities, like



podcasts, that he might engage with in the future. Again, even in moments of liveness, there is always a sense that famous creators must be future-oriented and always engage with the next possible opportunity to mine for profit. Furthermore, the PokéTubers also preferred Twitch as one is allowed to swear without having their views hindered (YouTube, 2020). The penalty for swearing in YouTube videos starts off as an infraction and the video being de-monetized. Another infraction can result in one's YouTube channel being banned from livestreaming or being suspended completely.

The “realness” of the creator during live streams is particularly highlighted to create an authentic connection with the audience. Some creators elect to use virtual backgrounds if there is an in-game event or holiday, however, most of the time, the creator or streamer is simply producing content from their bedroom. This production occurring in the bedroom showed the behind-the-screen space where content was produced. Bo Ruberg and Dan Lark have extensively analyzed the importance and intimate space that the bedroom creates:

The practice of streaming from the bedrooms lays plain the invitation to intimacy and access that is inherent in all livestreaming. After all, the basic fact of streaming implies an intimate invitation: entry, via webcam and direct address, into the private space and thoughts of the streamer. Looking to the bedroom as a site of performance on Twitch reminds us that all livestreaming, wherever it takes place, is an intimate, embodied, gendered, and arguably erotic business that often literally takes place in the home. Put in spatial terms, all streaming is streaming from the bedroom (2020, 13).

Streaming from the bedroom, literally or metaphorically, becomes a way of inviting the audience into one's private space without any filters. In this sense, it solidifies what Baym has described as constant connectivity practices and boundary making that grounds the intimate work of connection with one's audience (2018; Chess, 2020). In a dubious vein, The demands of platform economies under neoliberalism require that the

PokéTubers become livestreamers in order to maintain their stronghold with their audience and brand sponsorships across changing demands from audiences. PokéTubers become always on, always producing content, and always performing realness for their audience with no actual safety nets or secured benefits in the long run. My next chapter will be a case study of a microcelebrity fanartist on tumblr to juxtapose the differences of social media work across content and platforms.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **I Choose You: Queer Relationality and Temporal Investments on tumblr**

#### **Introduction**

Unlike uploaded videos, community meetups, and game livestreaming content, Pokémon GO fanart production was not supported by Niantic and had different forms of economic production and relational ties. Additionally, unlike videos that can be easily monetized once a platform's criteria are met, fanart is not commissioned or monetized by the main corporation or platform. Fanart is often produced as a spontaneous response to a specific character, relationship, or moment, or lack thereof, in a popular movie, game, or other media. Fanart is often queer and not-safe-for-work based as there are limitations regarding gender identity, sexuality, and nudity that can be shown via mainstream media and distribution sites. Indeed, fanart and fanfiction is often used as a medium of remixing the canon to appeal to various fans' desires. Although fanartists can receive commission requests from their own followers, it is rare that fanart is sponsored by corporations. With the release of Pokémon GO, one fanartist became viral because of their interpretation and queering of the non-playable characters in the game. Surfage (*hereafter, Surfi*) began producing Pokémon GO fanart that highlighted non-binary representation and queer and polyamorous relationships among various characters in the game. Fans on tumblr quickly re-blogged on their own tumblr sites as well as shared across social media platforms. Surfi's viewership and engagement with their content skyrocketed in August 2016. The importance of going viral for Surfi signals that media corporations like Niantic are not able to provide narratives or the relationality that a digital artist can. Indeed, fans whether digital artists or fanfiction writers often queer the canon and create their own fanon,

which expresses popular desires that can never materialize in the series or game. In other words, these fan creations and artworks on tumblr push back against heteronormative discourses by generating conversation among fans and creators. I will discuss Surfi's history as a digital artist and their particular use of tumblr as an unpaid site of building relationships with their fans in my next section. On this note, the platform of tumblr, for Surfi and other creators and fans, allowing for sustained virality conversations within the tagging system, transparency for artwork, and constant questions and answers from fans and creator. I engage with Surfi's work over a two-year period to emphasize how their art not only remixed 20 years of Pokémon content, but created the conditions for digital intimacy through queer relationality to occur. In this chapter, I argue that the unpaid temporal investments and commitment to queer representation on tumblr formed a queer relationality that allows fanartists to maintain an emotionally and, eventually, financially supportive fanbase.

I draw on scholarly research of fandom, internet celebrity, and affect to understand how unpaid temporal investments on tumblr create moments of intimate storytelling and queer relationality. Since this chapter is concerned with the various tactics, emotional patterns, and intellectual rights that Surfi deployed in order to build an emotionally and financially supportive fanbase, it is imperative to highlight various theories that are salient throughout this case study. Communications scholars have theorized about audience and fans pre and post-social media and how they are not merely active consumers, but producers of culture. Indeed, theorists detail how fandom culture often began in the form of zine culture and exchanging works at conventions (Jenkins, 1992). Rebecca Tushnet has researched copyright and intellectual property law in relation

to fan-produced content and works that transform original trademarked characters from the canon (Tushnet, 1992). Moreover, major corporations realize that fanfiction, fanart, and other fan-produced content is often beneficial for their audience and business so long as the creator is not profiting from their characters or mass distributing this information online (Tushnet, 1996, 2012). Furthermore, there is a plethora of research that has examined the significance of emotional, unpaid labor, and reciprocal gift fandom economies (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013; Turk, 2014; Stein, 2015), however, this chapter expands the scholarly focus to the blending dynamics of labor practices that begin as unpaid investments on platforms.

To be sure, fans are also not merely productive or cynical but are quite frenetic in their interaction with a creator (Postigo, 2014, 2016). Feminist and critical media scholars have expanded Jenkins's sometimes limited, productive analysis of participatory culture of fan production and content creation as devoid of or able to escape everyday power dynamics (Chess, 2017; Abidin, 2016). Many scholars have pointed out that Jenkins's works often neglect the experiences of working-class women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, and folks outside the U.S. and E.U. paradigm. For instance, Rebecca W. Black (2008) analyzes online fan fiction and provides a canon-specific investigation of shipper (relationship-based) fiction. Her work explores how women use these already canonical characters to take a counterhegemonic and counter-heteronormative stance against the network's commercialized romance goals and slash the confirmed romantic pairing in new ways. Scholars like Kylie Lee (2003), Michaela D. E. Meyer and Linda Baughman (2007), and Kristina Busse (2005) identify writing fan fiction as a source of feelings of pleasure and agency for women and other marginalized groups; however, according to

these scholars, this pleasure does not necessarily subvert institutions of power. Instead, they frame fan fiction as potentially reproducing dominant ideologies such as whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity as standards. Abigail De Kosnik (2016) argues that even if women and other marginalized groups participate in the production of fan fiction, the economic and managerial structures of media corporations or the majority of online spaces are not balanced by gender or race and are not friendly to fans. To be clear, Surfi is producing mostly fanart, but they are still creating an AU, engaging in world-building practices with their audience, and providing additional narratives that Niantic or Pokémon GO do not; thus, for this chapter, Surfi's fanart that contains a self-written story or response or any webcomic panels are also considered under the realm of fanfiction.

With the advent of social media, audiences now consume fan-produced content from all parts of the globe and across multiple platforms. Transmedia storytelling or transmedia is a single story or post expanding across platforms to generate interest among various audiences (Jenkins, 2011). Louisa Stein (2015) notes that transmedia dimensions are not limited to the media industry for publicity purposes, but are mediated by fans for their works. For instance, in *Millennial Fandom* Stein notes fans' reactions on social media, particularly tumblr, to the omitted marriage proposal of Kurt and Blaine—*Glee*'s primary gay storyline—from the season 5 premiere: *All you Need is Love*; fans were quick to react on tumblr and crowdsourced the money to purchase the cut scene and host an airing on YouTube (Stein, 2015). Here, Stein posits how fans mobilized their anger or sadness of a crucial, omitted scene across multiple social media platforms much like how fans alerted Surfi that their artwork was stolen. This crux of Stein's argument is crucial for tumblr brand and audience building as in a short period Surfi was able to imprint their

art style and mobilized their fans to their defense. Much of this dissertation has so far taken seriously the affective commitments and investments that content creators adopt when trying to establish a fanbase. My last chapter looked at how YouTubers used their uploaded content to engage their audience in unique at-home experiences. Furthermore, my last chapter showcased how YouTubers obtained corporate sponsorship via collaborating with one another and using Twitter to cross-post content for more views and likes. Ultimately, this eventually transformed synchronously with the video game market so that these influencers on YouTube also began game live streaming. However, uploaded and live streaming content on the former platforms differs from most fanfiction and fanart on tumblr as the artist's face and voice are seldomly part of the brand-building process. In "Queer Reverb," Alexander Cho examines the "affective dynamics of a subset of practices of queer users" in LGBTQ tumblr communities (2015, 44). Cho looks at how certain posts have a "high degree of reverb, and individual tumblrs that have many followers enable or possess a high degree of reverb" (2015, 54). Cho uses the reverb metaphor to understand how affect circulates, specifically images, in tumblr's queer communities (2015, 47). This reverb is perceived as the intensity of the emotional experience and value; tumblr enables a high number of re-blogs and likes, which is associated with a happy or socially important image. tumblr's vast cultures and a population that grew up with the image-heavy platform pre-Adult Content Ban created nonheteronormative spaces and discourses in order to showcase their various lived identities (McCracken et al., 2020). To crystallize, I contribute to this scholarship by analyzing how Surfi's branding and establishing a resonance or reverb with their audience is through a queer reading of the canon. Furthermore, Surfi's resonance with

their audience is through development of queer intimacies and relationality by investing unpaid time in producing art that will generate positive, happy feelings and representation with their fans.

My focus on the most viral Pokémon GO fanartist in this chapter complements the analytical framework of relational labor and platform economies that provide the backbone to this dissertation project and discussed in the introduction. This chapter interrogates and discusses how Surfi built what I call queer relationality with their tumblr fans. Surfi accomplished this through intimate storytelling via queering the canon and unpaid temporal investments. The temporal investments Surfi engaged with are specific to tumblr. First, Surfi would often respond to anonymous asks and requests as well as showcase images of how hard they were working to produce art. During the down time of posting new artwork or comics, Surfi would shitpost via a quick sketch of Pokémon GO characters or just a random meme so that they can connect with their audience. Second, Surfi also engaged in storytelling through the tagging system. Unlike other platforms, tumblr's tagging system is often known for having side commentary or spaces that extend the conversation from the original image, GIF, or text-based post. Afterward, I briefly discuss the 2018 Adult Content Ban that prohibited all porn, "female-presenting nipples," and other adult content flagged by an Automated Intelligence (AI) system. This content ban is crucial to understanding how queer relationality and temporal investments allowed Surfi's audience to serve as content moderators and messengers when content was removed from their page. My next section will discuss Surfi's origins as a digital artist, how they went viral and built an audience, and their commitments to queer representation for their fans on tumblr.



## Are you a Boy or a Girl?



**Figure 4.1** Surfage's first Pokémon GO post that discusses the presumed gender of Blanche, leader of Team Mystic.

Since 2010, Philippines-based artist and software engineer Surfage (Surfi) has used tumblr as a photo-sharing platform and publicity space for their fanart. Having originally used LiveJournal (2007) and Dreamwidth (2008), Surfi prefers tumblr over the former two platforms since it is accessible, allows anonymous asks from friends and strangers, and easy to share ideas and artwork with attribution (personal communication, 2017). Surfi began their career with Naruto fanart by expanding or diverting from the series' canon to create their subplots, queer romances, or additional characters. Instead of following the canon, or an anime series characters' relationship verbatim, Surfi

oftentimes creates a fanon—events that the fan community create through art, fanfiction, gifs, memes, videos, or other visual and written venues. When Pokémon GO was released in July 2016, Surfi decided to experiment if their Pokémon GO art would be popular and garner an audience like their Naruto fanart. Their first post responding to the fandom’s notion that Blanche is a non-binary character while the other team leaders are a cisgender woman (Candela) and cisgender man (Spark) became extremely popular. In figure 4.1, Blanche responds to the timeless question “Are you a Boy or a Girl?” with “I’m perfect.” For lifelong fans of Pokémon, the aforesaid gender question has been asked since 2001 and in every generation of Pokémon games thereafter, except for Pokémon GO. This was a departure from enforcing players to choose their gender and allowed players to simply choose and swap their outfits of choice at any given time. Surfi’s first post and having Blanche refuse to answer the gender question received over 88,000 likes; indeed, their first foray into Pokémon GO fanart was successful and had their fans desiring more content. However, Surfi is a full-time software engineer and puts in an average of 40 to 50 hours of compensated labor a week; their artistry work is largely unpaid, bar a few merchandises like keychains or stickers they sell at conventions in South East Asia, and consumes another 30 to 40 hours of labor a week. Most of the time a simple sketch or outline will take 30 to 60 minutes, a wallpaper for one’s phone background will take approximately 4 to 8 hours, and a webcomic page can take several hours each day throughout one to two weeks (personal communication, 2017).

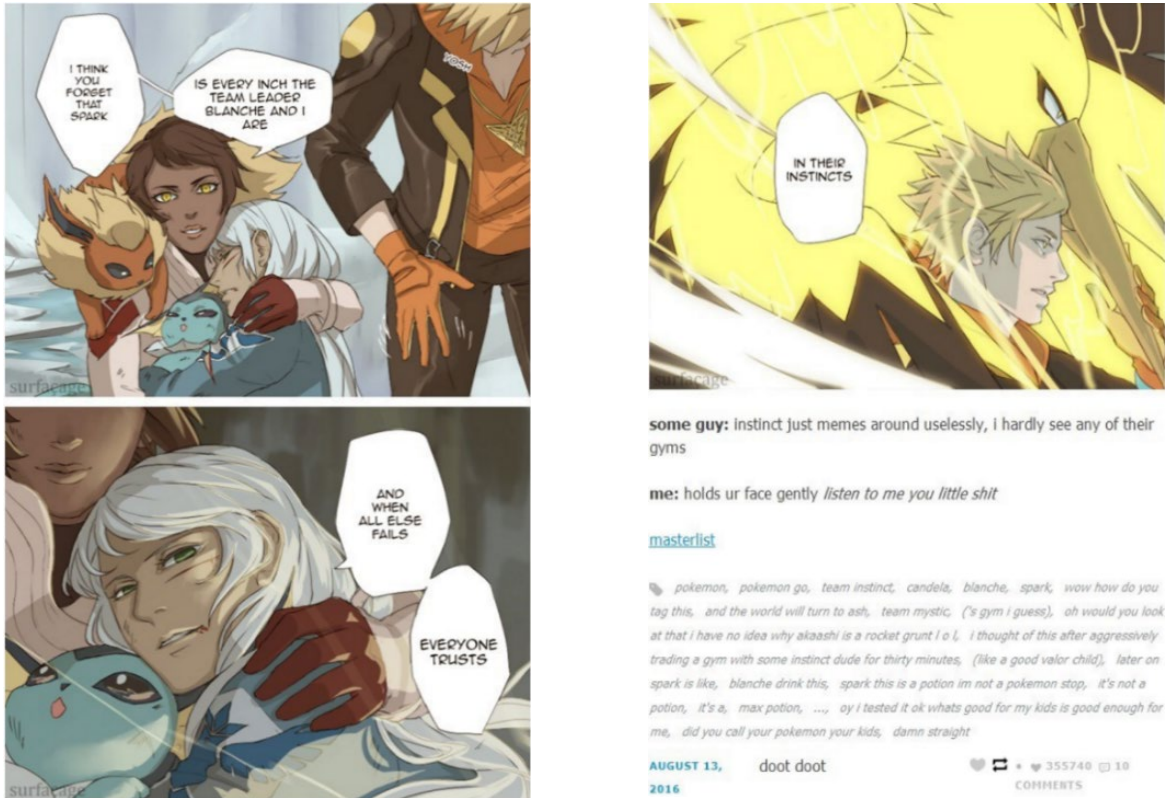
Throughout the rest of this chapter, I trace Surfi’s unpaid work on tumblr that transitions to my next chapter on membership-based crowdfunding on Patreon (chapter five). Although my population size is only one, my methods chapter (chapter two) dives

into depth of the importance one popular, microcelebrity fanartist brings to an analysis of neoliberalism, social media platforms, and the real subsumption of everyday life. Indeed, in this chapter, I follow the work and shadow the everyday life of Surfi's artwork on tumblr for over two years and conducted two semi-structured interviews in 2017 and 2018 in order to articulate and pinpoint the specific geographical and neoliberal contexts that Surfi endures while trying to gain additional income for their Pokémon GO artwork. To answer my research questions, I trace the virality of Surfi's posts and flesh out the processes that they partook in to secure their audience. I take seriously the online interactions and constant communicative strategies that Surfi deploys when starting their Pokémon GO art trajectory (Senft, 2008; Hine, 2015; Baym, 2018). Surfi's audience on tumblr provides an interesting point of analysis as this content is not expected to be paid or any revenue to be generated. Outside of a digital tip, Surfi conveyed that their art on tumblr is for their audience and not for pay. However, Surfi's virality complicates my first research question as they eventually transition their artwork and exclusive art content to another, paid platform. Speaking to my second research question that asks how content creators who achieved fame also adjust to the shifting ecologies of tumblr, and does this influence their labor practices, I analyze various mechanisms that tumblr's platform used to harm creators like shadowbanning, making features that make less-popular creators' content appear less often, and the 2018 adult content ban. Finally, to answer my last research question, "how the intersection of neoliberal ideology and platform capitalism via branding, analytics, and personalized media production are interacting with Pokémon GO creators' ability to be successful on platforms," I conceptualize various labor and emotional strategies that Surfi engages their fans with that fall under the guise of

neoliberal logics. It is imperative to note that Surfi is the only creator outside the U.S., U.K., and E.U. paradigm who did not have access to particular resources to scale their audience like YouTubers. My aforesaid research questions, like the first part of my dissertation, are quite porous and are thus interwoven into several sections throughout this chapter. My next section will now discuss the transmedia dimensions that were afforded when Surfi went viral and how the audience became emotionally invested in their content and original art and storytelling.

### **Transmedia Dimensions: Going Viral and the Affective Audience**





**Figure 4.2 (reading left to right):** Surfacage's (Surfi's) original and first viral webcomic with over 350,000 likes and several fan dub versions.

On August 13, 2016, Surfi posted the conclusion to their first full webcomic showcasing a battle between the three Pokémon GO Team Leaders and Team Rocket (Figure 4.2). In Pokémon GO, there are three teams and leaders—Team Valor (led by Candela), Team Mystic (led by Blanche), and Team Instinct (led by Spark)—and are represented by the Pokémon Moltres (color red), Articuno (color blue), and Zapdos (color yellow), respectively. When a player reaches level five, they choose a team and can partake in gym battles and raids. Besides gaining experience and ranking your Pokémon, the team leaders have barely any functionality or lore that most fans desired. Since Niantic focused on the international release of *Pokémon GO* and preventing players from cheating as mentioned in the preface, the team leader storylines were underdeveloped.

Furthermore, as most of the Pokémon fandom remembers, Team Rocket—the villainous group of the franchise—was remarkably absent from Pokémon GO until 2019. Since Niantic had other priorities with the release of Pokémon GO, Surfi as well as other fans began to create new stories and characters about the teams in high-quality non-traditional short fanfics, webcomics, and sketches that occurred in alternate universes (AUs). Surfi’s virality is what propelled them to the top and culminated in having fans of their own.

Figure 4.2 illustrates Surfi’s first viral post that was widely circulated not only via tumblr but Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms. As aforesaid, Figure 4.2 concludes the Team Rocket ambush and victory over the water and ice and fire type team leaders Blanche and Candela, respectively. Spark intervenes by calling on his team’s mascot and legendary electric-type Pokémon Zapdos to end the battle and drive out Team Rocket from stealing any more Pokémon. Fans were captivated by Surfi’s expansion of Candela, Blanche, Spark, and the inclusion of Team Rocket and the creation of a new Team Rocket’s leader—Noire (twin sibling of Blanche). In September 2016, Let’s Dub Project dubbed over the entire comic and uploaded the video with credit to Surfacage, which ultimately garnered more traction and followers via tumblr (Let’s Dub Project, 2016). Furthermore, the popular fanfiction site, Archive of Our Own (AO3) had tags or characters that stemmed from Surfi’s webcomic, particularly about Blanche and Noire and various queer relationships among the team leaders. Ultimately, Surfi expressed how grateful they were for all the well-received praise and miniature spin-offs that their fanart and storytelling provided the Pokémon GO fandom. However, shortly after their initial virality, various Facebook Pokémon GO groups and fan pages started sharing Surfi’s comment without proper attribution.





Hey, fandom. Let's talk.

Anyway so this page reposts my comic right, no link to the original source. There's some shit going down about crediting.

Some people are like, calm the fuck down. Admin isn't claiming it as their own, the watermark is there, etc, etc. Some people are then like, that's not enough. Put the source.

How hard is it to just edit the links into the pictures? How hard is it to just maybe...if it's so *easy* to look the artist up...look it up themselves? Then link it before posting?

**If you use an unpaid artist's work to drive traffic to *your* page at least have the decency to source them.**

I can take no-permission reposting on sites that I haven't posted it on before, but please. Write the source.

**People can look the watermark up, stop whining!** You have to understand that it makes an artist's work *much more accessible* to an audience if you put a single-click link in the description. It's easier to click once than type a potentially illegible watermark into Google and look it up. Any content producer knows this, but this is something most reposters fail to understand, or refuse to.

What if I make another part? If there is no source, how would the audience know there's been an update?

**It's just fanart! Do *you* have the rights to it?** No, a fanartist does not (eta) have the rights to the original characters, but does that invalidate the time and effort the artist spent to make the work? We're not paid for this. Come on. At least give us a single line of credit. Give us the traffic generated.

Dude, it took me someone linking the repost that there are like a thousand comments on the comic. You know what a content producer likes?

**Feedback.**

(If anyone is wondering, reposts can be taken down by a DMCA request - most sites that aggregate content will have some way of filing this.)

**Do you credit the original owner of a meme?** This isn't a meme. This isn't a published work with the backing of a company. It's something someone spent hours on because guess what, they love the canon source. Is this what it comes down to nowadays? Wow.

*pokemon go, fandom, fanartist, fanart, this applies to any kind of art you find on the internet actually, pokemon, surfage*

AUGUST 19, 2016 doot doot 6807 1 COMMENT

**Figure 4.3:** Surfi reaches out to their audience to discuss their viral webcomic being circulated without attribution or links to their tumblr.

Even though content creators watermark or time stamp their art or other content, other fan pages across social media siphon viral traction. Surfi was alerted that their popular webcomic in Figure 4.2 was being posted on multiple Facebook pages without hyper-linking their tumblr. Figure 4.3 (left panel) demonstrates Surfi responding to a Facebook Pokémon GO fan page that posted their artwork for views, likes, and shares

without proper attribution to the artist. One of the admins of the Facebook fan page responded that there was no way to reverse image search on mobile and it couldn't be proven that the content was Surfi's to which Surfi responded with their watermark and a helpful red arrow highlighting their brand. To be clear, even if Surfi or their fans reported this content to Facebook, it would have taken several hours or days to have it flagged or removed. Indeed, platforms are generally horrible at removing and de-monetizing stolen content as the views, clicks, and any one-time purchases are predominantly occur within the first 24 hours of posting (Taylor, 2018; Caplan, 2020). In Figure 4.3, we see Surfi take to tumblr to explain the importance of crediting fanart, fan fiction, and other fan-produced content to the original author. Surfi is transparent that they are making Pokémon GO fanart for their fans and are not being compensated. In response to whether "do you have rights [to the characters]," Surfi concedes no, but explains that the time, energy, and labor to bring content to their audience deserves recognition and visitor traffic to their platform. The latter question of whether fan-produced content that innovates characters and their narratives is a contested question in fan studies and communications for decades.



## Queer Relationality



**Figure 4.4:** In October 2016, Surfi posts a quick sketch in response to a surge of asks regarding Blanche’s and Noire’s gender(s).

Surfi uses their tumblr and artwork to primarily build relationships with their fans through queer relationality and intimate storytelling. Since their artwork went viral, Surfi has perceived Blanche and their own created character, Noire, the identical twin of Blanche, as non-binary; Noire is extremely flirtatious and muscular, whereas Blanche is very much a bookworm and tactical instead of athletic—a classic twin trope. As noted, fans were generally ecstatic to see complex non-binary characters in Pokémon and not have them conform solely to femininity or masculinity. However, during an interview with Surfi, they expressed how their inbox, which still had over 9000 unread messages, would mostly request shipping of particular characters and gender. Indeed, one of the most asked questions in their inbox is “what gender is Blanche [or Noire]?” and “did I

change the gender of [insert character name here]?” (Figure 4.4). Several times, Surfi would provide pronouns in their comics and various stories, but pronouns do not necessarily correlate with a presumed gender. When asked if the questions about gender were alarming, they responded:

The shipping asks and requests I understand, [but] the gender one is maybe because people are just so curious! Non-binary people are not really common as far as I know in comics, and I do not really want to make the story or my comics just about gender, but people will naturally ask when they see something new (personal communication, 2017).

In this testimony, the use of “curious” could be taken in a myriad of contexts. Fans might be curious because they have never “seen” non-binary characters in the Pokémon franchise of comics, generally. Curious could allude to the presumption that a non-binary character or person must present or dress a certain way that falls outside traditional masculine or feminine clothing. In this case, Surfi is providing representation that has long been absent from mainstream publications and video games but is salient and supported on tumblr.

During the two semi-structured interviews I conducted with Surfi, the topic of Blanche and Noire being non-binary continued to be discussed at length several times. I was candid that I appreciated seeing myself, as a non-binary gaymer, in their comics and it was evident that other fans were through anonymous inbox comments and asks (personal communication, 2018). When pressed on what space or story Surfi hopes to achieve for Blanche and Noire, they responded,

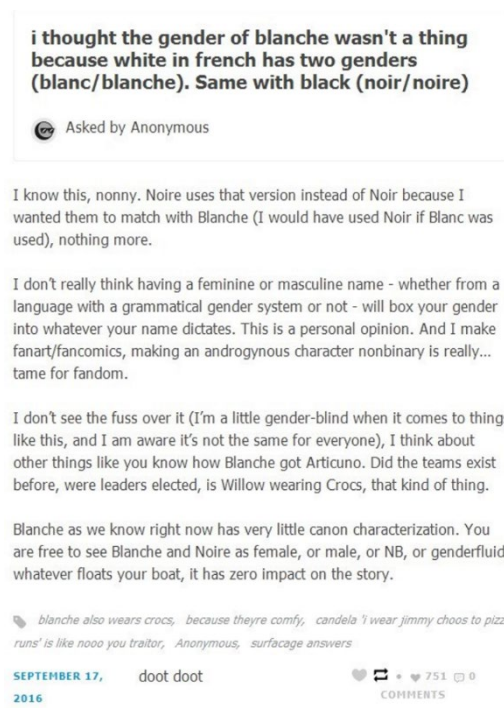
Barring spoilers, this is hard to determine. I let my characters flow and attempt to describe a very human story for both [Blanche and Noire] and with Pokémon involved. Most fans of my comic grew up with the franchise and cartoon and I want something they could relate to as adults. I do not want to shy away from same-sex, multiple-sex, or any type of sex that the child cartoon did. My characters are well-liked for being non-binary but their gender will not determine

their relationship outcome, which I think some of my fans might be disappointed with (personal communication, 2018).

Non-binary and queer representation is not necessarily what solely attracts fans to Surfi's artwork, but a shared sense of intimacy through relationality. Much like Bo Ruberg (2019), I do not mean to de-value representation and the importance of diversity within video games. The need for non-binary and non-binary characters of color is crucial in video games. Furthermore, the Pokémon franchise is based on real-world locations with the first four generations (1996-2010) being geographically set in Japan and generations five through eight (2010-2020) being based in NYC, France, Hawai'i, and the U.K., respectively. In this vein, racial diversity has always been present in Pokémon, yet Western fans presume that anime characters are predominantly white or that white is simply a default for video games. In terms of gender, the franchise has predominantly been heteronormative with character creation being only girl and boy or gendering jobs such as all the Pokémon nurses are Nurse Joys (cisgender women). In alignment with Ruberg, I posit that there is queerness within considerably heteronormative games, like Pokémon. Surfi's audience on tumblr enjoy seeing themselves represented, but this is not a zero-sum game. Indeed, Surfi's response to the consistent story development of Blanche and Noire does not want to signal a "non-binary" experience. Instead, Surfi desires to provide their audience with complex characters where gender does not necessarily matter, but one's intimacy and affinity to the character is more important.

Lauren Berlant says that intimacy "involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (Berlant, 1998, 282-283). tumblr was one of the few social media sites where not-safe-

for-work (NSFW) images, porn, and other content often perceived as part of the private sphere was publicly visible and widely shared. As a platform where images were shared, and a type of narrative and genuine closeness was built, tumblr allowed followers to form connections with the creator. In this vein, Surfi was able to build relationships online through their attentiveness to queer representation and discourses. Indeed, many scholars have discussed how digital intimacy that occurs online means continually being present in various asynchronous moments and being able to communicate and pay attention to your fans or followers at any given time (Dobson, Robards, and Carah, 2018\*). Indeed, digital intimacy has often been commodified via neoliberal logics of individualism and entrepreneurialism in which any (un)paid work online must be monetized and made productive under capitalism (Dobson, Carah, and Robards, 2018; Ouellette, 2016; Abidin, 2018; Guarriello, 2019).



**Figure 4.5:** Surfi commenting on the presumed gender of Blanche & Noire and gender's grammatical genesis in language.

Heteronormative discourses via asks or comments on tumblr are often moments for creator and audience to build a type of digital intimacy or queer relationality without requesting donations or tips. In figure 4.5, an anonymous (commonly known as anon on tumblr) person proclaims Blanche and Noire are gendered in their native language and ultimately solidifies their gender. Surfi combats the claim of a truly feminine or masculine name from a grammatical gender standpoint by asserting that one's language does not necessarily box one's gender identity. Surfi proceeds to assert that they are usually gender-blind when it comes to things like "this," which references the original anon's ask. To be clear, Surfi does not mean to conflate gender blindness, like colorblindness towards race, as living in a post-gender world where gender has no impact on everyday lives. Instead, Surfi is emphasizing that gender blindness is relating to clothes, behaviors, language, and other characteristics that are conscripted to the female/male binary. Furthermore, how one perceives the gender has no impact on the story is crucial here as it allows folks who may align more with femininity or masculinity to see moments of themselves portrayed. Also, instead of having non-binary or gender fluidity being a defining trait that will guide a character towards a certain, potentially mainstream narrative, they are complex characters that merit character development.



**Figure 4.6:** Left photo: Team Valor Leader Candela (right) trying to initiate romantic contact with Blanche (left). Right photo: Candela “winning” after initiating romantic contact with Team Instinct’s Leader, Spark.

Queer friendly asks or comments will often amplify Surfi’s voice as well as fellow supporters. Furthermore, queer-friendly comments and artwork effectively stimulate an audience or support network that will repulse hatred or divisive users. Although figure 4.5 shows a tamed, yet curious comment regarding Blanche and Noire’s gender, Surfi has iterated that many asks in their inbox completely say I’m wrong and should draw Blanche or Noire in a more feminine manner, which I do not care for since it has no impact on the story (personal communication, 2018). Evidently, this is expressed in a quick sketch in figure 4.6. In figure 4.6, Surfi notes that the focus on their comics and narratives is not solely on gender, but also romantic and sexual orientations. Although the fandom has settled that Team Valor’s Candela and Team Instinct’s Spark are cisgender, it does not necessarily mean they will have heteronormative desires. Often, Surfi’s comics or narratives will depict romantic and emotional interactions between Blanche and

Candela and Blanche and Spark, whereas romantic and sexual encounters will be reserved for Candela, Spark, and Noire, in any of the aforesaid polyamorous or monogamous combinations. Surfi's fans enjoy these side interactions that eventually make it into a comic or lead up to a new comic's release. In this sense, a space for non-heterosexual or non-heteronormative expectations occur and are supported by the community. Indeed, this follows suit to what Amanda Potts found in her study of Minecraft gamers and fans on YouTube. Potts asserted that "nonheteronormative discourses" are often produced by prominent gamers and created a "self-policing fan community that advocates acceptance and rejects bigotry" (Potts, 2015, 163 as in Abidin, 622, 2019). After their viral comic, Surfi became a prominent fanartist and cultural critic for the Pokémon GO community. By re-mixing over 20 years of Pokémon content with Pokémon GO and creating their queer fanon, Surfi provided discourses via artwork as a form of digital intimacy and queer relationality.

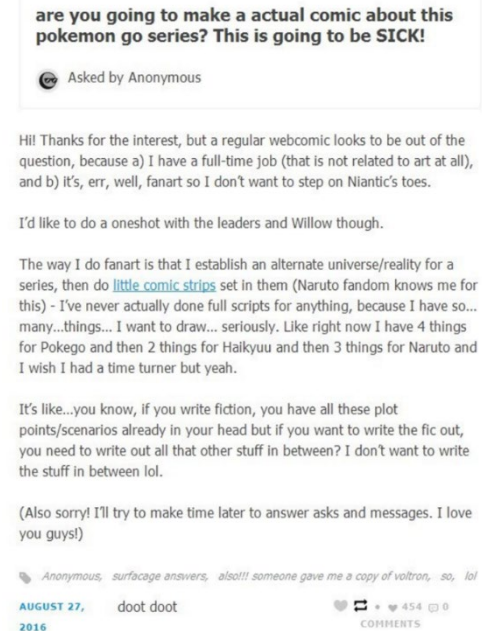
Queer relationality then becomes the unpaid maintenance of a supportive fanbase to counter heteronormative discourses. In his timeless introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, Jose Esteban Munoz says,

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is a queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house (2009, 1).

The queer networks that formed through Surfi's unpaid artwork on tumblr resonate with Munoz's description of queerness as an ideality. Surfi ultimately provides additional validation and visibility for non-binary and other queer folks through their fanart and

narratives, yet nods towards an idea of what life could be like with complex character development. Indeed, Surfi sees their characters as partially an extension of themselves and their fans they met along the way (personal communication, 2018). In this vein, the unpaid content Surfi creates and the time devoted to numerous asks or requests provides a form of relational work with their fans. This ultimately becomes an unpaid temporal investment; however, neoliberal market and entrepreneurial logics corrode queer ideality through commodification. My next section will look at the unpaid investments Surfi engages through tumblr's ask feature and analyze neoliberal demands of productivity through commodification.

## Temporal Investments: Asks, Productivity, & Shitposting



**Figure 4.7A (left) and 4.7B (right):** Surfi responding to two of many requests to keep producing webcomics and narratives.

One of tumblr's noteworthy features is to anonymously ask questions or send requests to the creator. Differing from other social media platforms, tumblr did not rely



on a comment-like-response infrastructure that was integral to YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram's success. Although there is a comment feature, the re-blogging of one's content on tumblr was usually the preferred medium of sharing attribution and affirmation. Instead of commenting, followers generally send an ask or gratitude through direct messaging the creator. Surfi was often overwhelmed after their initial virality and attempted to cull the bulk of the asks, requests, or spam each night (personal communication, 2017). In figures 5.7A and 5.7B, Surfi shares two of several hundred requests to keep producing the webcomic from earlier figures. Although this is not uncommon for artists, Surfi has a full-time job not related to art and sees their artwork as a way to make others happy (personal communication, 2017). In other words, Surfi's art production is not meant to serve as a second job, however, the concept of just making the fans happy has political stakes rooted in economic productivity. This section particularly analyzes the various asks and productive commentary from fans directed towards Surfi on tumblr from July 2016 to July 2018 in order to unravel the complex logics of neoliberalism when investing time and successfully mining emotions for long-term value.

Besides ko-fi, a digital tip jar to buy an artist coffee or tea, Surfi did not directly monetize their tumblr content. Working a full-time job and investing anywhere between 30 to 40 hours a week on uncompensated fanart theoretically falls outside the realm of neoliberal capitalism, which suggests making everything and everyone profitable. Indeed, Surfi's unpaid labor suggests that they are not working smart enough and are missing an opportunity to capitalize on their audience. Most content creators who go viral or notice an analytical uptick in their viewership will begin to run ads or partner with certain brands before the initial spike wanes (Johnson et al, 2019). As Surfi mentioned, tumblr

does not provide direct analytics and they only noticed their virality because of how many reblogs and fan-produced content was made from figure 4.2. A lot of content creators feel moments of anxiety or precarity if a certain post or video flops (Abidin, 2016) however, Surfi commented on their posting habits with quite the opposite standpoint:

Whenever I press that post button and check if it posted correctly, I close the window, actually, and leave. I do something else and leave it alone.... I feel accomplished and just go sleep or something, then check a couple of hours later. There was a time I obsessively refreshed to check feedback but now it's just drop the post [on tumblr or wherever] and run.

Surfi's commentary can be perceived as a moment of resistance, in which they push back against the expectation of feeling anxious about how well one's product will be received by their audience.

**How do you manage to produce art so fast? It takes me like a month of daily drawing just to make one full color thing... D: Do you have any tips on how to get faster?**

Asked by Anonymous

1) **Practice.** A lot of practice.

2) **Make a workflow and stick to it.** You need to sit down and work out what flow you are most comfortable with. It might take a while to find something that works for you, but it will be there. For example, if you are a portrait artist, do you start with a sketch or jump straight to it? Do you start with the eyes, or hair? If you are a comic artist, do you write the script out, or jump straight into thumbnails? The more you work with routine, the faster you do it.

3) **Plan and review your process.** You need to remove unnecessary work to save time; every service-oriented business knows this. I'm sure most artists have done something like render in great detail a section of their canvas, only to realize it's not that visible when zoomed out, it's not the focal point, or it will be covered by something else. *You need to remember these times and not do them again.*

4) **Take breaks.** This might seem to be contradictory, but the last thing you want is to burn out. Trust me, the feeling of being burnt out is right up there with art block, it *sucks*.

There's a vast amount of tips for different art fields - a comic artist will work differently than a concept artist, etc, but I find that the above works for most. You might want to ask a more specific question if you want to know more.

***And just a reminder to everyone: the amount of art you produce does not determine how good of an artist you are.***

Also, it's not so much that I make art fast, it's just that I usually (this is largely inadvisable) run on 4-5 hours of sleep - comic artists keep horrible hours.

*i actually have a cold now lol, pls dont do the 4 hour sleep thing it will fuck you up, surfacage help, Anonymous*

DECEMBER 15, 2016      doot doot      1067      1 COMMENT

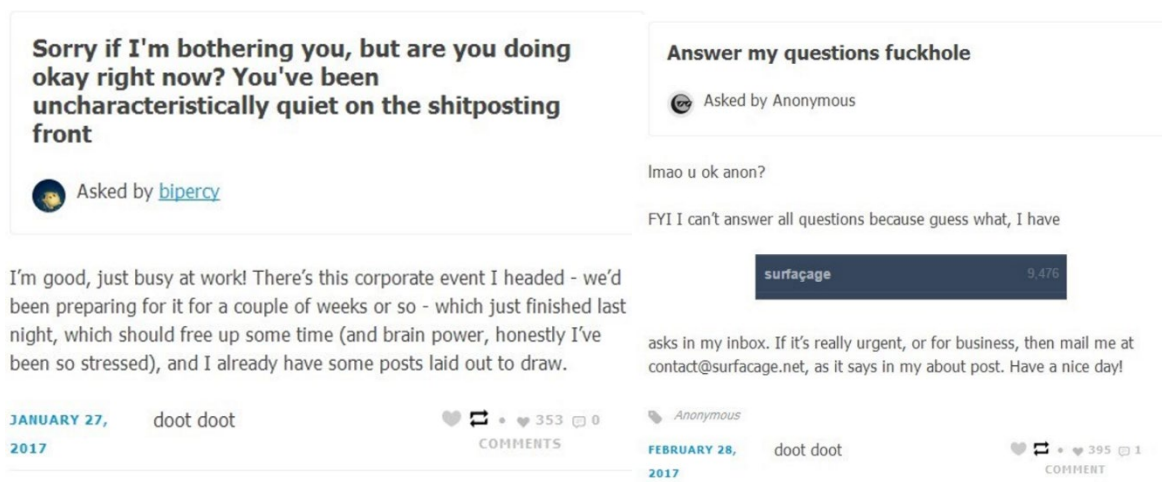
**Figure 4.8:** Surfi responding to an ask on how they are so productive and keeping up with fandom demands.

Although there are moments of resistance, neoliberalism is a type of stealth, non-politics that shrinks the concept of a common good in favor of privatization and

monetizing every possible cultural activity (Duggan, 2003; McRobbie, 2016; Brown, 2019). Since the first neoliberal experiment on September 11, 1973, in Chile (Harvey, 2005) to the social media economy and influencer and microcelebrity cultures (Senft, 2008; Abidin, 2018), neoliberalism is the overarching rhetoric that guides one's labor practices online. What makes neoliberalism so covert is its ability to cloak market demands and class struggle into individual shortcomings that can simply be resolved by turning culture, fun, and choice into profitable activities. Indeed, neoliberalism as the defining force behind the social media economy demands a constant spectacle of being productive or engaging as illustrated in figure 4.8. This figure illustrates that fans are curious of Surfi's productivity and as a result, Surfi has to give a detailed overview of how they are able to produce art in an on-demand fashion. To be sure, fans are impressed that Surfi can be so productive and post regularly and figure 4.8 captures a comprehensive overview of their process. Although Surfi advocates that "the amount of art you produce does not determine how good of an artist you are," they cannot escape the intensive work demands and shame that comes with neoliberalism. Indeed, neoliberalism acts as a paradox in one sense it supports self-care and taking time off, whereas on the other hand, it also demands every living hour, behavior, and emotion be mined for profit. This is evident in several conversations and posts, Surfi mentions how they encounter drawing and writer's block and then feel shame for not posting anything new, which spirals into no posts for several days (personal communication, 2017, 2018). The entrepreneurial and productivity demands of neoliberalism often leads to feelings of guilt and precarity. This precarity can be emphasized as constantly needing to produce content that relates and is popular among one's audience. Surfi does not have the

equipment, collaborations with other digital artists or creators, and connections to corporate sponsorships that the YouTubers in chapter three had. This testimony resonates with neoliberalism as a “crisis state” (Gill and Pratt, 2008). However, this crisis state is very much individualized and compartmentalized in a speeded-up media cycle. This sped-up cycle requires constant posting or production rather than weekly episodes like a television series or podcast. Not only does Surfi have to manage their full-time job, which provides financial security, Surfi has to engage in taking risks in order to keep their audience interested in their original art productions.

In my next section, I will discuss conversational tagging culture that occurs on tumblr, but it is key to note the conversation going on in figure 4.8—“I actually have a cold now lol, pls don’t do the 4-hour sleep thing it will fuck you up” and its relation to going viral on social media. This is quite indicative of neoliberal demands in the social media economy in that virality will not last forever and one must capitalize on it before it fades into the ether. Thus, even if one is sick, they need to figure out where to make sacrifices in their life in order to succeed. To be sure, this sacrificing sleep is a prevalent issue in gaming cultures and game live streaming cultures. Going without adequate sleep is obviously not healthy, but the competition to maintain one’s audience and followers’ attention on social media is challenging and requires risks to one’s wellbeing (Johnson, 2018). Furthermore, the social media economy often does not offer health benefits or social goods in favor of flexibility to work. However, this flexibility is a double-edged sword as we can see Surfi’s health and bandwidth for posting decline to the point where fans are concerned or angry.



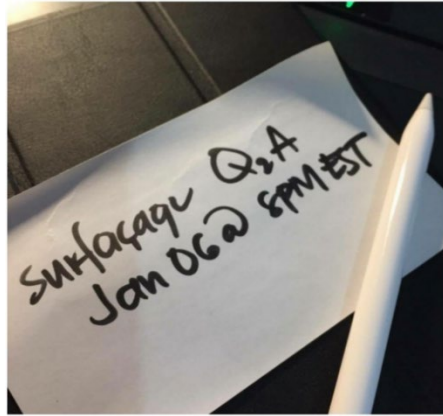
**Figure 4.9A (left) & 4.9B (right):** In 5.9A we see one of many fans reach out regarding Surfi's lack of shitposting. In 5.9B, we see a fan frustrated that they are not getting any responses to their questions.

As a platform, the posts, artworks, or memes on tumblr are often presented as a type of cultural critique or counterculture to mainstream capitalism. By this, I mean the postings on tumblr are modes of expressing discontent or precarity with one's everyday working conditions. Often times and throughout my research, Surfi would update with how tired they were and needed a day off. Furthermore, Surfi, along with many other creators, shitposting becomes a way of rejecting one's working or production expectations to just bond with your audience or fans. Indeed, shitposting is one way that creators build relationships with their fans. For Surfi, shitposting can entail re-blogging someone else's content, a quick sketch, or updating one of their comics. Fans become attuned to the regular updates or shitposting from Surfi that it is evident when something is wrong in their everyday life (figure 4.9A). Although moments like figure 5.9A are acts of care between an anonymous or self-identified follower, they are not necessarily signifiers of a utopic space. tumblr is not outside the pervasive modes of neoliberalism even with supportive fans like those in figure 4.9A. Figure 4.9B demonstrates that when

fans feel unattended or neglected they will voice their frustration before ditching and no longer supporting the creator. Although shitposting is supposed to be a way of letting your audience know you are still engaged with them but need a break from regular content, figure 4.9B illustrates what happens when fans feel ignored. Unlike traditional celebrities, microcelebrities or influencers are supposed to be communicative with their fans; however, Surfi shows they have over 9,000 asks in their inbox and it is impossible for them to answer all of them. Prior to going viral, Surfi was not receiving as many requests and demands from fans. When discussing how they felt about going viral and their folks demanding more art or posts, Surfi replied,

Very grateful, very humbling. I don't know what to say really. I wasn't expecting to get a [inaudible] audience that wanted to see more of my shitposting. I was like, okay to more shitposting but also it makes me just want to do more stuff that fan can bond over, you know? It makes me sad if I cannot produce something in time or reply in time and see people mad, but there's only so many hours and energy drinks, haha.

Surfi's testimony here is evident that tumblr often clashes with the neoliberal idea alongside the professionalization demands of platform capitalism n. Furthermore, Surfi's use of the term shitposting demarcates a lacking or not deserving of compensation when in fact shitposting is being mined for value and building the essential network for financially supportive friendships. The brutal demands of neoliberal ideas of entrepreneurialism in conjunction with platform capitalism demands over-productivity and creating conditions of precarity and de-valuing fandomwork as merely casual if it is not for monetary purposes. The over-productivity and burn out cycles are evident by many creative laborers willing to give up sleep and their physical and mental health in order to appease their fans and supporters who may ditch for lack of content (Lupton, 2016; McRobbie, 2016; Abidin, 2020) .



Hi, it's been a while! I'm doing a Q&A over [my FB page](#) in about 1 ½ hours (Twins III 2&3 is under way lol)

artist talk

JANUARY 7,  
2017 doot doot

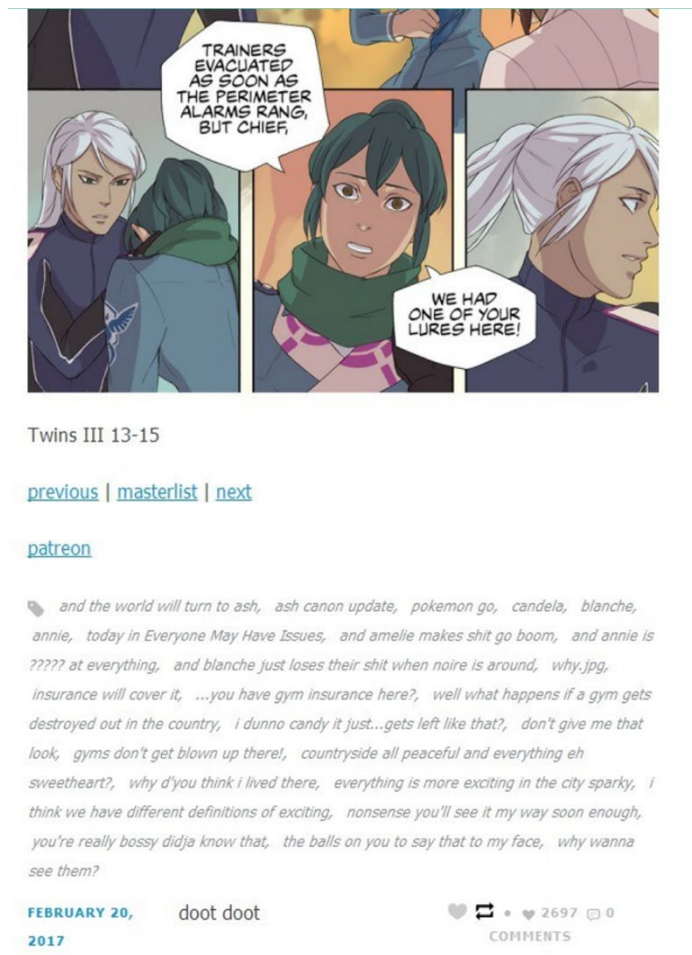
233 COMMENTS

**Figure 4.10:** Surfifi hosts a Q&A session for their followers and to update them on the Twins comic that they are behind on.

Unlike the YouTubers, Surfifi knows that virality around a post, trend, or phenomenon does not last forever and needs to be nurtured before it dissipates. Surfifi mentions several times in our interviews and direct message chatting that they cannot justify having what seems like a second job but no tangible income. In this sense, Surfifi attempts to continue their daily shitposting, answering questions, and hosts the occasional Q&A to keep their fans informed of their workload and that they are sorry for being so behind on artwork and replying to them. This resonates to what Eva Illouz has argued about emotions being public. In *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Eva Illouz argues there is a historical shift to modernity that demands emotions to be part of the private sphere but is constructed as an inner influence on our day-to-day interactions and social investments (2007). In other words, capitalism forces emotions to be part of the private sphere and concealed from everyday markets; however, the social media economy has uprooted the need to suppress emotions from one's audience or work. Indeed, Surfifi always concludes with how much they love or appreciate their

audience. With the unpaid investments that neoliberal logics demand of Surfi, they can build friendships that are supportive and fend off toxicity. This becomes more salient in another unpaid labor exercise—conversational tag culture.

## Temporal Investments: Conversations in Tag Culture



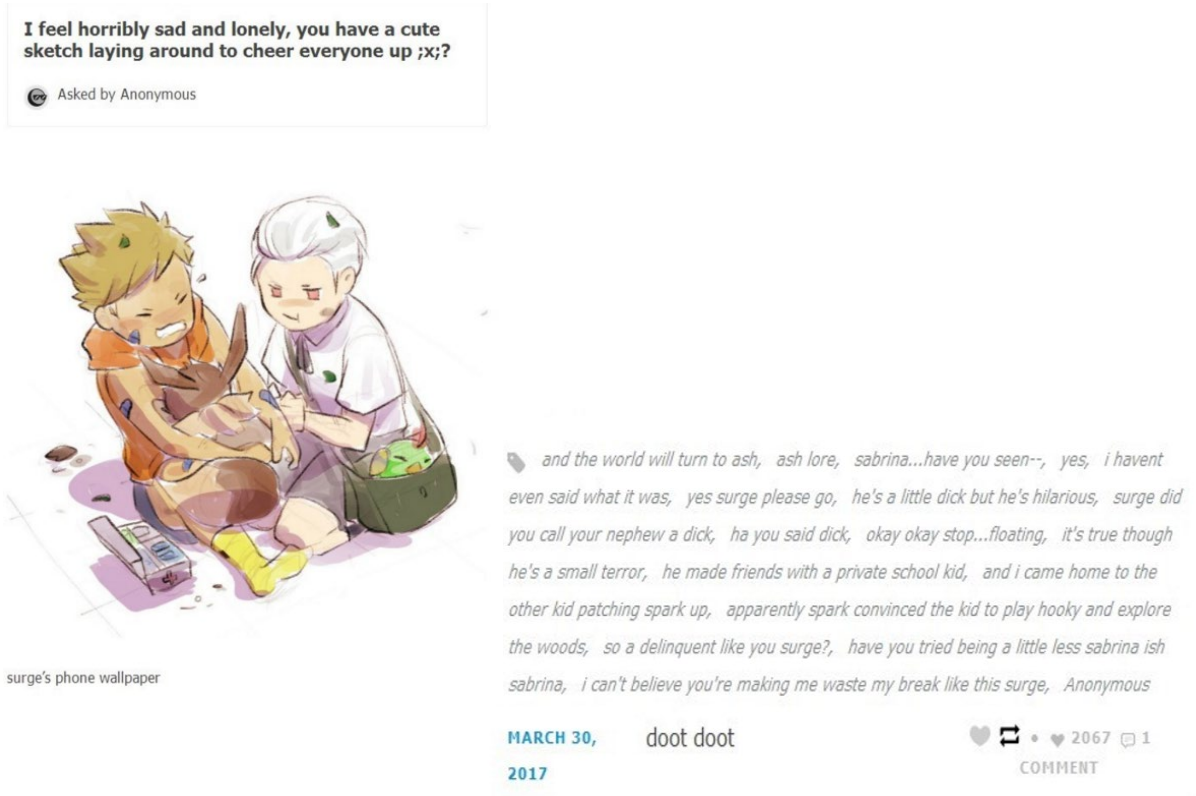
**Figure 4.11:** A part of the webcomic titled “Twins” showcasing the extensive use of tags as conversational.

Tagging on social media platforms is an essential part of archiving virality and communicating with a specific audience. Hashtagging or tagging usually entails a hashtag (#, formerly known as the pound key) and a word or phrase used to find specific messages on a topic or to connect with an audience or community, like Black Twitter.



For instance, Twitter is often credited with popularizing and standardizing the hashtag with political, cultural, and economic discourses and connecting activist communities on multiple social media sites (Burgess and Baym, 2020). On Twitter, various hashtags have gone viral such as #BlackLivesMatter, #brexit, and #blessed; these hashtags often group various political, activist, or cultural messages into a specific topic so one can readily find them and join a conversation or see the most popular tweets from that hashtag. On the contrary, tumblr hashtagging (tagging) is quite different than other social media platforms since one does not need to start with the hash symbol (#) to hyperlink a tag and one can have spaces within a singular tag. Indeed, tumblr tagging culture is often used as a space to hold a conversation with oneself or the audience, essentially where the audience will read the tags. Figure 4.11 is a prime example of tag culture on tumblr; there are a few tags that organize the post into a category like Pokémon GO, however, most tags are short, side conversations that do not occur in the webcomic or sketches. These conversations are meant to be talking points or be brought up via anonymous asks (personal communication, 2017). Although my last section analyzed the pervasive neoliberal market logics of time and productivity, this section looks at additional unpaid labor via conversations that occur in the tagging of each post to analyze another strategy Surfi employs to solidify a financially willing relationship and friendship with their audience. As mentioned in the previous section, most social media platforms base success off analytics like impressions and interactions on Twitter via likes, re-posting, or comments. Although one still receives likes or comments on tumblr, there is no active count of how many people have seen or engaged with your content without third party software help. Surfi prefers this model over Facebook or Twitter as the constant checking

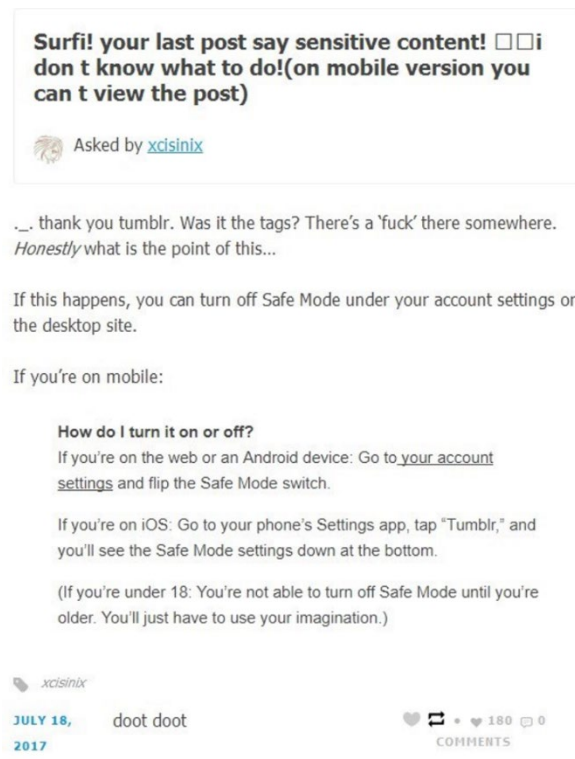
of analytics can be anxiety-inducing and force them to take a post down and try again for more views. Indeed, there is a type of algorithmic anxiety around tagging appropriately in order to receive the greatest number of views and new followers. As a result, tagging on most social media platforms become a two-fold method of ensuring: 1) audiences stick around by feeling engaged and sliding into their direct messages (DMs) or comments, and 2) new audience members interact with the content and decide to follow the creator or re-post. However, the aforesaid tagging method works differently on tumblr by adding another step—3) new and old audience members feel comfortable to talk about their personal life to other followers.



**Figure 4.12:** Surfi providing a quick sketch to cheer up an anonymous follower.

It is not uncommon for followers to reach out to creators about how their video, content, or personality has helped them overcome adversity or depression. From my datasets and interactions with various posts and followers, this feeling of depression and precarity is part of a larger, systemic emotional resonance of capitalism, influencers and microcelebrities often receive fan-mail, direct messages, or presents to express how thankful they are; however, this differs on tumblr because it is unilaterally anonymous. In figure 4.12, Surfi responds to an anonymous fan who is feeling sad and lonely by providing a new sketch of two comic characters from their childhood. First, Surfi does not know who the fan is, so unlike YouTubers or Instagram celebrities, Surfi does not need to anonymize their information to share it with their general followers. Second, the

sketch provided might seem like any content creator wanting their fans to cheer up, but Surfi, as well as other artists, keep the conversation going in the tags. Instead of tagging solely used to archive this post for later, it is used as a personalized story. Despite this feel-good post, tagging in tumblr requires a lot more mental labor as one is telling a short story and is still uncompensated for their labor. On the one hand, the creator is happy for their work and potentially making the anon and other fans happy, but, on the other hand, the creator is already spread thin and is using this space to solidify and potentially monetize friendships (Hair, 2021).



**Figure 4.13:** Surfi describing how to turn off safe mode to avoid not being able to see posts.

Indeed, friendships are continually solidified in various forms, like support or feeling happy, through the conversational tagging culture on tumblr. Since tumblr tagging can be sentences or conversations, they would often contain profanity or presumably

lewd content. As such, tumblr would flag some of Surfi's posts as sensitive because of the language in the tags and prevent their followers from seeing those posts without confirming they are okay with sensitive material. When folks used the tumblr app, they would often not be able to view the post if "safe mode" was on even if they clicked okay, which iOS claims was a temporary bug. In figure 4.13, Surfi provided detailed instructions on how to work around this bug and turn off safe mode from iOS and Android so their posts can be visible without the sensitive material warning. The tension of content moderation is often put on the onus of the creator. In this situation, fans are wondering how to navigate the site's algorithm that suppresses posts that have profanity in the tags. Surfi and other content creators will often have to make a post on how to turn off a specific setting or to manually subscribe to e-mail notifications about a new post.

Moreover, friendships via tagging conversations also aid the creator when the platform begins to shadowban or flag their work as profanity. Several times throughout the two years of fieldwork, posts went missing and followers, including myself, were not able to find Surfi's tumblr homepage. When asked about how they feel about various posts being taken down for profanity in the tags or images, they responded,

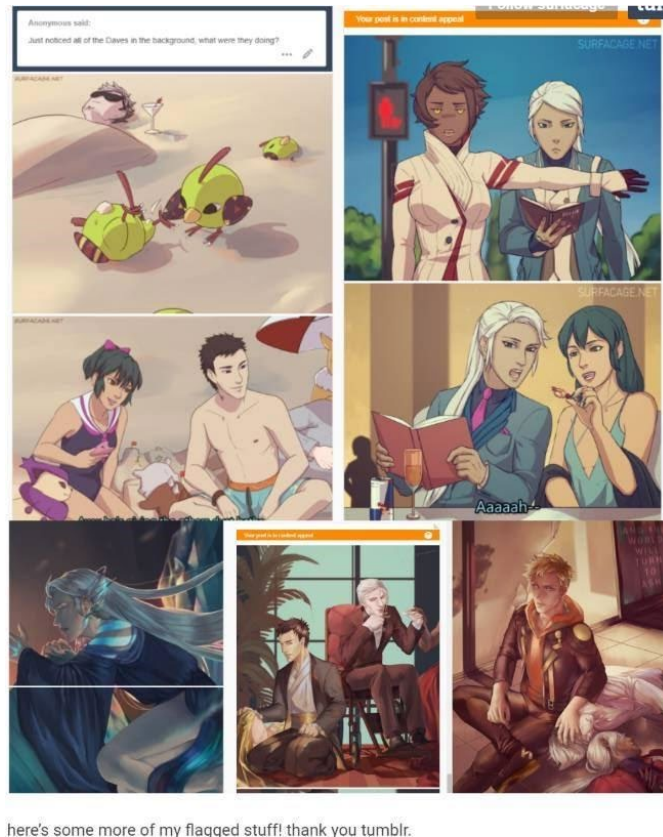
I don't think I'd notice all the drawings that are sensitive? I don't get the point in taking my posts down because I say fuck in the tags? All creators do this, we talk in the tags. My fans notice everything, every conversation, every additional to the stories or shitpost. If a post from a year ago goes missing, within a day someone will tell me. I feel grateful but it's hard to keep up, you know what I mean?... I wouldn't know what's missing and when is it missing from. How do I work full-time and over-time, shitpost in the morning, shitpost at night, sketch a new wallpaper, keep up with Patreon requests and tumblr asks, and monitor my posts? If my fans were not checking in on me or my missing shitposts, I don't think I do this.

Surfi's description here is not merely being overworked, but reliant on their fans to know when something is off. Their fans ultimately formed a "distributed intelligence" network

and are highly knowledgeable individuals who understand various parts of an organization or platform's algorithm and specialize in specific tasks (Leadbeater, 2000). Media studies scholar Sophie Bishop expands on Charles Leadbeater's concept via "algorithmic gossip" (Bishop, 2019). This term takes seriously the gossip that occurs between one's own community and how algorithms are ultimately affected by it (Bishop, 2019). In other words, and given how tumblr is quite diffuse regarding how knowledge is consumed, constant feedback loops, asks or requests, and re-blogging allows the creator to know which concept to post and have a perception of how algorithms are working on tumblr. Furthermore, as any one person could be scrolling and see a nude photo, political critique of republicans or democrats, or artwork in succession, one's engagement with the piece will determine future content that is seen by fans. However, suggested content will follow an algorithm in which content one has engaged with before is featured at the top and this is only disrupted if a user is shadowbanned, deletes their account, or has a post removed because it violates terms of use. The distributed intelligence network and algorithmic gossip that has formed on tumblr is evident as key parts of the webcomic story or everyday shitposting narratives are missing and fans are quick to notice a memorable post missing. Instead of Surfi having to sift through each post every day, fans do some of that labor for them instead and then report back any missing content. Furthermore, these posts are memorable because Surfi has also dedicated time to conversing with fans in them since they cannot comment or respond to every ask or requests. This distributed intelligence network and algorithmic gossip dovetail with my next section in which I investigate the 2018 Adult Content Ban and untangle what happens when platforms decide to abruptly change policies that harm the creator and

push the limits of what fans can do to mitigate damage. Ultimately, I assert that the queer relationality developed through intimate storytelling and the unpaid temporal investments provided the safety net so that the 2018 Adult Content Ban or other platform policy changes would not overwork Surfi to the point of leaving the platform completely.

### De-platformed?: The 2018 Adult Content Ban



**Figure 4.14:** Surfi (December 2018) comments on some of their flagged content after the 2018 Adult content ban was announced.

As discussed in chapter two, the original research timeline for this digital ethnographic case study was July 2016 to July 2018. With the Not Safe For Work (NSFW) tumblr ban announced in December 2018, I decided to go back into the digital field to obtain more data and distinguish which posts were flagged or removed from my

original data sets. To add to this longitudinal ethnographic study and within the tradition of qualitative research, I engaged with the scrolling back method in order to uncover and digitally trace changes over time with content and how the platform's algorithm ultimately affected Surfi (Robards and Lincoln, 2017). This section will explore how Surfi and their fans mediated the 2018 Adult Content Ban and ultimately had to change platforms entirely. The Tumblr NSFW content ban is important to this chapter because it showcased two scenarios about artificial intelligence (AI) dealing with content moderation. First, the AI removed any images of "female presenting nipples" as well as other images classified as potential nudity. The AI was faulty that it would remove cartoon nipples, images of Pokémon because its butt (which was its backside as seen in figure 4.15 below) was exposed. Second, this faulty AI used to moderate NSFW content resulted in the audience pinpointing which posts were removed from Surfi's tumblr as there was no notification for content being flagged or taken down. As such, and discussed in greater detail in this section, the audience loved Surfi's content enough that they engaged in the unpaid labor to find which works went missing and help in appealing the content removed.

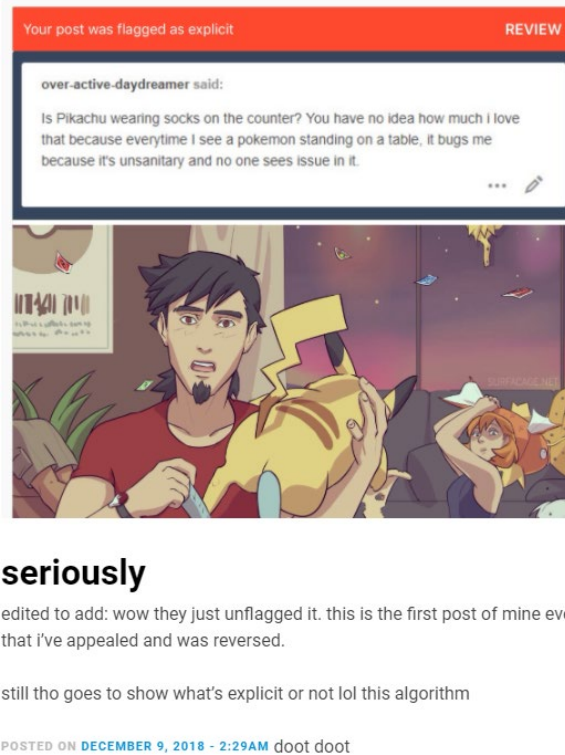
Within the first month, over 20 percent of users abandoned tumblr in favor of other social media, crowdsourcing, or digital tip jar platforms. Surfi told their followers that they would mostly be active on FaceBook and attempt Twitter. After the new year, the platform generally fell apart and most folks took to Twitter, OnlyFans, or other less popular websites like DreamWidth to provide unpaid and subscription-based content (Tiidenberg, 2019). Furthermore, there is a general sense of loss around romantic freedom and being sexy as pleasurable that existed on tumblr pre-NSFW ban. Indeed,



NSFW, nudes, sexually suggestive, or kinky positions can all become part of a pleasurable creative process and fantasies (Tiidenberg, 2019; Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019). With the 2018 NSFW ban, the platform essentially began forbidding that freedom that so many LGBTQ, sex workers, and other marginalized folks relied on tumblr for.

tumblr was known for its hands-off approach to sexual and adult content as well as lax content moderation -- “a live and let live” philosophy. However, in December 2018, tumblr announced a new plan to ban all “photos, videos, or GIFs that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content... that depicts sex acts” (tumblr, 2018). This decision generated backlash from users and the broader public and was seen as disproportionately burdening marginalized groups of people and non-mainstream acceptable forms of work such as LGBTQ youth, NSFW (fan)artists and fanfic writers, and sex workers. The platform’s ban directly impacted Surfi’s art and had them immediately back up as many of their posts as possible in case their page was completely removed (personal communication, 2018). Although Surfi did not post not-safe-for-work or explicitly sexual content on their tumblr, which was reserved for Patreon or private direct messages, their content was still being flagged for removal and removed from their page. Indeed, the algorithm for censoring content still infringed safe-for-work fanart and fanfiction. Figure 4.14 is a compilation of all the posts that were flagged as sensitive and were targeted for removal. In figure 4.14, we see various fictionally illustrated characters interacting by feeding each other food, the visual image of a non-binary person’s thighs, and a male-presenting nipple none of which necessarily fall within the purviews of tumblr’s adult content ban. It is imperative to note that the algorithm flagging content cannot differentiate between male and female-presenting

nipples and queer bodies in this case. In other words, the algorithm is specifically targeting what it believes to be feminine features and assigning a type of biological truth to bodies and thus supports scholarly arguments that have critiqued platform's policies and algorithms that disproportionately police women's and queer folks' bodies in digital spaces. To be sure, Surfi made it apparent through posting and reaching out directly to their fans that they would appeal anything flagged for removal. tumblr made this process more difficult as Surfi said they had no way of finding out which post is flagged without going through each one manually or having their fans notice a post or webcomic panel was missing (personal communication, 2018). tumblr provided an appeal process, but Surfi was clear that none of the censored posts were reversed, barring one. In figure 4.15 (below), the only censored post that was restored to full viewership portrayed Pikachu's butt—a fictional electric mouse and the mascot of the Pokémon franchise. Both figures elucidate the question: is the algorithm simply broken or is it working as intended to moderate queer content seen as unfit for mainstream consumption?



**Figure 4.15:** A post flagged as explicit that was eventually appealed and reversed. This was the only time tumblr reversed a post marked as explicit for Surfi.

The ban also signals how platforms at any given moment can inhibit artistic, creative, and other non-mainstream forms of work or cultural critique. Amelia Acker and Brian Beaton term this struggle between platforms, creators, and audiences as “update unrest,” which focuses on the constant negotiation of power dynamics between users and developers of a specific platform or software. The rhetorical and technological aspects of the ban also speak to Tarleton Gillespie’s socio-cultural aspects of content moderation and Tania Bucher’s work on how people become aware of algorithms (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2017). As noted, Surfi predominantly moved to Twitter and Patreon to keep their fans updated. However, by July 2019, just at the time of their 3-year anniversary, Surfi halted most of their Pokémon GO artwork production on tumblr and Twitter. With barely any posts in 2019 on tumblr and mostly just updates of their life on Twitter, there was no

motivation to continue unpaid fan labor. Furthermore, with their full-time work picking up more hours and not feeling like their artwork could inspire conversations like the pre-2018 NSFW ban, they began to pause production on the comics and sketches, which also extended to Patreon (discussed in Chapter five). Surfi has conveyed several times that they cannot produce B-level work and must be on their A game and the crippling shame of not producing work or having their unpaid work flagged removal was really demotivating. This timeless neoliberal narrative of productivity coupled with the socio-cultural aspects of platforms serving as the custodians of content and discourse (Gillespie, 2018), which ultimately led to Surfi pausing their Pokémon GO artwork entirely.

With the ban exacting its toll on Surfi, their fans remained loyal and wanted to support Surfi in any way possible. Although some were already supporting via Patreon, more fans donated via Kofi (a digital tip jar that allows an artist or creator to get a cup of coffee) and join their Patreon after the ban was announced (personal communication, 2018). Furthermore, fans were relatively quick to jump ship and follow Surfi on Twitter and Facebook as well. This type of support even when a platform has uprooted their livelihood and consumed more of their uncompensated time resonates to what Lauren Berlant writes about love in *The Female Complaint*. Berlant says,

...while the conventions of love identify it as an unmistakable feelings (except when it isn't and has to be revealed), love is a binding relation to time, not a steady state of object desire; it involves a need for events both of grandiose and credible ego confirmation; and it is a form of repetitive attachment that attracts to itself many affects and emotions all at once, usually in a jumble—but figuratively or ideologically they are all of a piece (14, 2008).

Berlant's writing on the expectations of romantic love as binding and attachment to time rather than a desired object mirrors the relationship that Surfi has built with their

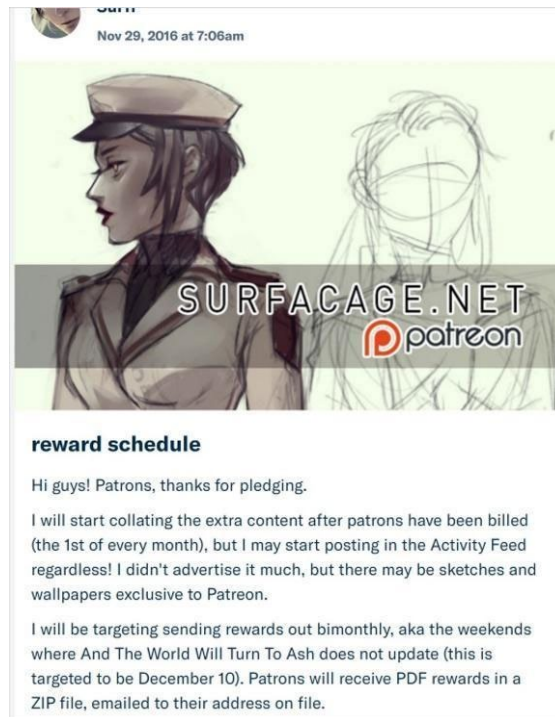
followers throughout several years. In this vein, the digital intimacies and queer relational moments that Surfi built for over two years through unpaid artwork and conversations on tumblr has formed a type of love with their audience. Not in the sense of romantic love, but a sense of relational, platonic love where Surfi's fans have the utmost admiration for them rather than solely their artwork or capacity as an artist. Regardless of how platforms have changed what content is censored, Surfi's followers treat their art and comics as a bonus in favor of simply seeing Surfi succeed and doing what they are most passionate about—drawing. Essentially, Surfi's work along with their audience's support goes beyond simply being subjected by neoliberal and platform capitalism demands of being over-productive. The fans, for the most part, observe that Surfi produces art as a labor of love. Although the artwork on tumblr is personalized for a large audience consumption, fans are well aware of the effort and intimate engagement that goes into each piece or webcomic. Indeed, I assert here that fans return the love of two years of unpaid work that Surfi produced by helping mediate the impact of a platform's content moderation and policy that explicitly impacts Surfi's content.

In this chapter, I have traced the various practices, emotional patterns, and unpaid labor that Surfi engaged with their fans from July 2016 until December 2018 to showcase the creation of sustaining relationships on tumblr. Their initial virality aided in expanding their audience and emboldened fans who wanted to financially support Surfi; however, as a platform, tumblr only provided space for Surfi to build authentic, relatable connections with their audience. tumblr failed to thrust them into influencer status where they felt secure enough to leave their main 9-to-5 job. Indeed, as a prime example, Surfi had to post across social media platforms in order to record analytics and attract new fans since

tumblr does not provide direct analytical reports like YouTube. Additionally, several productivity demands, stolen content, content moderation, shadowbanning, and the late-2018 Adult Content Ban hindered Surfi's artwork from being found by new folks or liked and re-blogged by current followers, especially with the platform losing more than 20 percent of its users in December 2018. Fans kept desiring more content from Surfi but there are only so many hours in the day and Surfi could not keep justifying unpaid labor. As a result, Surfi did not aspire to become an influencer like other Pokémon GO creators, particularly those on YouTube or Twitch. Instead, Surfi concluded that in order to continue their artwork, they would need some type of revenue to justify spending 30 to 40 hours a week. Ultimately, this chapter outlined the building blocks to demonstrate how Surfi maintained their fans and eventually transitioned into sustained, additional income by providing personalized media via digital tipjars like Kofi and subscription-based model via Patreon. My focus here is how content moderation and policy changes on tumblr ultimately impacted Surfi's decision to create exclusive, uncensored content on the membership-based crowdfunding site, Patreon. As mentioned earlier, Surfi was content with producing art for free, but there was a resounding notion to make their artwork more productive and profitable. Even though tumblr was an unpaid platform, neoliberal policies of entrepreneurialism and branding alongside platform capitalism extracts a demand on creators. The demand is to make every possible interaction profitable, which is inclusive of the unpaid, temporal investments that Surfi engaged in. My next chapter will look specifically at this labor transition and analyze the relational bonding from creator-patron interactions and how they are maintained through a personalized rewards-based system on Patreon.

## Chapter Five

### And the World Will Turn to Cash: Membership-based Crowdfunding and Relational Bonding on Patreon



**Figure 5.1:** Surfacage’s Patreon and their first post picturing Candela, Leader of Team Valor, and an outline of Blanche, Leader of Team Mystic.

#### Introduction

In November 2016, the popular Pokémon GO fanartist, Surfacage (*hereafter* Surfi; they/them) created a Patreon to host exclusive, personalized paid content for their tumblr followers. Surfi is based in the Philippines and unlike my previous chapter on YouTubers, did not have access to specific workshops or programs to foster their audience. Indeed, since using the tumblr platform was a mode of building queer relationality and unpaid temporal investments, Surfi sought a different way to monetize their art—crowdfunding. Unlike traditional modes of crowdfunding where one donates

once and receives a finished product or gratitude, Patreon revolves around monthly subscribed crowdfunding and continual creator-funder interactions. Patrons (the name for a funder on Patreon) join a reward tier based on how much they are willing to donate to their favorite creator(s) and then gain access to posts, voting rights to events and rewards, and monthly rewards. In their first post (see Figure 5.1), Surfi explains how exclusive, monthly rewards will be sent to each patron; Surfi then details how Patreon rewards will be received. For instance, if one is billed for December 1<sup>st</sup>, they will receive the previous month's (November) rewards because that is when they were voted upon. Rewards, such as sketches, work-in-progress, or patron requests, will then be sent as a ZIP file via e-mail or direct messaged to the patron. Furthermore, Surfi's Pokémon GO content will be made exclusively available in the activity feed before it is published to their tumblr and patrons will get behind-the-scenes access to upcoming comics, speedpainting videos (showing the process of creating a webcomic or sketch sped up 32 or 64 times), and Not Safe For Work (NSFW) art, the latter of which is not posted to their tumblr.

Essentially, these VIP or exclusive access awards highlights the pinnacle of relational labor tactics in what I lay out in this chapter as relational bonding. Relational bonding refers to when bonds between creator and audience becomes so strong that even without a finished, exclusive product, the audience will be emotionally and financially supportive of the creator. This chapter lays out four strategies that relational bonding occur on Patreon: Tiered personalized content, routine apologies and updates, top-tier rewards, and pop-up shops. I expand the framework of relational labor by analyzing and interrogating the various relational bonding strategies on Patreon and how interactions between creator and audience occur in a pseudo-private, exclusively paid platform. I



argue that aforesaid four relational bonding strategies provide creators on Patreon with the building blocks to construct their own social safety nets and passionate audience that platforms fail to provide. Ultimately, this highlights what I call “relational bonding,” which is when relationships between creator and audience are so strong that fans desire exclusive products *and* fans will still support a creator even when exclusive deliverables are not produced for a month. Furthermore, my argument highlights a shift between creator and audience on crowdfunding platforms within gaming and art cultures for continued, monthly support for exclusive products rather than one-time donations or favors. In other words, membership-based crowdfunding are not one-time events, but become full-time jobs within platform economies that are dependent on creators securing strong relational bonds with their fans. I will explore this concept and its relation to platform economies and personalized media content shortly; first, I will provide more background information on Surfi and the importance of membership-based crowdfunding platforms like Patreon.

From February 2017 until March 2018, Surfi was ranked in the top 150 Adult Comics Creators on Patreon, which also includes NSFW comics (Graphtreon, 2020). Furthermore, from April 2017 to December 2018, Surfi has received at least USD 1,000 in pledges each month (Graphtreon, 2020). These statistics highlight that Surfi has built a strong, supportive bond with their fan base in order to garner economic success and hold a second full-time job via crowdfunding. Additionally, this constant, monthly product of personalized content signals a shifting structure within crowdfunding from a one-time project or economic relief event to subscription-based platforms that give funders tailored rewards, access to exclusive content, and relationships with the creator.

Expanding on my previous chapter, I examine the most popular membership-based crowdfunding platform, Patreon, to analyze how a content creator builds a large audience and reputation for providing exclusive rewards and products. I take into account the shift in crowdfunding models from a one-time donation for a finished, tangible product or economic relief (such as a new album, medical bills, or paying college fees) to a subscription or membership-based model for continued work and production from the content creator, which the latter models are prominent within gaming and art communities. This chapter examines how crowdfunding on membership-based platforms like Patreon demarcates a shift from the relational building that occurs on platforms to relational bonding for a sustained income in exchange for exclusive, personalized content. Particularly, this chapter uses ethnographic research to examine four strategies of how creator-patron interactions and relational bonding occurs via the structural design elements of Patreon that create a never-ending, personalized content loop through membership-based crowdfunding.

I offer an overview of product-oriented and community-oriented membership-based crowdfunding that highlights the various intersections between neoliberal demands of entrepreneurialism and passionate work and platform capitalism on Patreon. Traditional crowdfunding occurs as one-time donations for a specific product like a music release or for emergency care like medical bills or natural disasters. Crowdfunding on Patreon serves as not only a membership-based platform but as community-oriented to producing exclusive products each month. The shift in crowdfunding platforms within gaming and digital artists communities aligns with neoliberal demands of passionate work and mining every interaction for value and platform capitalism where creators can

operate their business from. Although I discuss crowdfunding models in detail later in this chapter, it warrants thinking through how continual interactions between creator and fans along with the promise of exclusive content or products each month depending on how much you pledge. Outside my analysis of one particular fanartist is how fans can support multiple creators and receive multiple rewards per month. In this vein and unlike traditional crowdfunding, fans or donators are able to see results and receive gratitude via personalized and exclusive content that others do not have access to. Crowdfunding thus becomes linked to an orientation of producing a specific product and building a community so that one can keep working on the Patreon platform. The community-oriented logic segues with my concept of relational labor because in some cases a bond between creator and fan will become so strong that not producing content for one's mental health or being overworked is okay. In this vein, there is resistance to the neoliberal mode and platform capitalism logics of always on the clock and working. To be sure, I am not arguing that neoliberalism is a zero-sum game of subjection and resistance, but highlighting how passion, community, and labor within membership-based crowdfunding platforms can exist in a complicated space that highlights the strong and caring relationships built between creator and fans.

To emphasize the aforesaid shift in crowdfunding platforms, this chapter will engage in detail with the four relational bonding strategies. First, I examine the tiered personalized content reward system that Surfi provides as a choice to their patron. Second, I illustrate how Surfi uses routine updates and apologies when they are behind on content and artwork to manage pledges and elicit support from patrons. Third, I revisit the various labor in top tier rewards like bonus goods (NSFW content), Artist Talk, and

promised communication to showcase how an artist must provide every minute detail about their work to their most loyal fans. Finally, I show how the culmination of aforesaid strategies resulted in the lasting support of Surfi through a pop-up shop and funding to attend more artist conventions. These four strategies relate to the overall research questions of this dissertation by focusing on the commodification of relational practices and strategies by content creators alongside utilizing platform analytics in order to be financially successful. In other words, platform capitalism revolves around a consistent effort by creators to be future-oriented about their work and finished products. Indeed, in order to be perceived as authentic by one's fans, the need for creators to give exclusive windows into their personal life, apologize for being ill, or exclusive products is imperative to understanding the shift from emotional to relational labor within platforms. Then, I extend these four strategies to offer an analysis of the impact that Surfi's micro-celebrityhood had in relation to the geopolitical context of the Philippines; I do this to emphasize how even with all the multi-year support and bonds with their fans, Surfi is not willing to part with their full-time software development job to undertake contract work from major corporate sponsors, like Niantic or The Pokémon Company International, as other content producers in the US or UK would often do. This geopolitical context broadens understandings of internet celebrityhood and opportunities for those to cultivate their career. Although someone in the US and Philippines may deploy similar relational labor and form relational bonds with their audience, the ability to be sponsored by corporations is still Euro and US-centric. My next two sections will discuss platform economies and affect and dive deeper into my concept of relational

bonding before analyzing the aforesaid four relational bonding strategies that occur on Patreon.

## **Platform Economies & Affect**

This chapter discusses crowdfunding on membership-based platforms and the concepts of relational labor and relational bonding add to the extant literature on digital labor, creative workers as influencers or microcelebrities, and platform economies. For instance, feminist media studies scholars like Alice Marwick (2015), Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012), and Laurie Ouellette (2016) have analyzed how televised celebrities become content creators on social media platforms to capitalize and brand their emotions as an authentic connection with their audience in order to generate additional surplus profit. Anthropologist and ethnographer Crystal Abidin have extensively researched influencer cultures, practices, and economies in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia; Dr. Abidin has developed key concepts such as porous authenticity and minority celebrity that elucidate the type of relational labor that occurs on membership-based crowdfunding sites like Patreon. In this chapter, I use porous authenticity to showcase the various “more secret, more genuine, more real ‘real lives’” (Abidin, 2018) that Surfi conveys to their audience in patron-only chat. Minority celebrity emphasizes the commodification of a marginalized or stigmatized population or practice of society (2019), particularly the queer and non-binary representations and NSFW art that Surfi produces, which is often not allowed on mainstream, public platforms.

The concept of stickiness and its impact on affect theory is imperative for thinking through relationality in the shift towards membership-based crowdfunding. Sara Ahmed’s (2008, 2013) overarching concept of stickiness highlights how emotions are

indeed political and the compulsion to generate a surplus of positive affect (happiness), whereas negative affects (shame and sadness) are often projected unto and result in violence for disenfranchised groups. In relation to platform and membership-based crowdfunding economies, I think Ahmed's stickiness through honey; if there is a surplus of sweetness (demands of happy content from the audience) the substance becomes unstable (precarious, poorly paid content creators), but can crystallize (membership crowdfunding attempt) in order to create stability (monetized relationships). This analogy is to emphasize how emotions, particularly the production and circulation of happy emotions, compel subjects living under capitalism to restructure or make productive every aspect of their life, regardless of how precarious or fleeting the new structure becomes. In terms of membership-based crowdfunding platforms, a strong *relational bond* between creator and audience via various crowdfunding strategies and circulation of happy emotions is formed and becomes hard to revert unless a drastic, heated, or controversial change occurs. I assert that relational bonding is an extension of relational labor to showcase how emotions become sticky in a pseudo-private space and through membership-based crowdfunding platforms. Ahmed's concept of stickiness demonstrates how fans rely on their emotional and everyday interactions resonating with their audience in order to form a closer relationship that would garner monthly support. In other words, stickiness is part and parcel of creators' toolkit for developing relational bonds with their fans. My use of relational bonding between creator and audience is discussed at length in my next section.

## Relational Bonding

I initiated this chapter with Surfi's first Patreon post and an overview of Patreon as a crowdfunding platform to demarcate a shift from relational labor practices that occurred on Tumblr (chapter four) to *relational bonding* that demonstrates a deeper creator-audience connection that supports a sustained income in exchange for exclusive access to personalized media that occurs on the subscription-based crowdfunding platform Patreon. This chapter uses the term relational bonding as an analytical lens for two purposes. First, it expounds on Nancy Baym's (2018) and Jan Padios's (2018) development of relational labor as the intimate connection that creative workers and marginalized call center workers, respectively, undertake in a precarious, global neoliberal economy. In her watershed work *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*, Nancy Baym defines relational labor as

the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work. This includes (1) the communication itself, but also (2) the time and effort it takes to develop the skills, knowledge, and other human capital such communication requires...; (3) the ongoing sense making needed to understand yourself, others, and the relationships you are building; (4) the development of communicative and relational strategies; (5) the voluntary making and marking it takes to set limits on relationships; and (6) the never-ending revisiting of all these things as each encounter can raise new dynamics (2018, 20).

Furthermore, Nancy Baym asserts that musicians are not only managing relationships with individuals, but with crowds or large audiences with who they have relationships or have the potential to form financially sustaining relationships (2018). Jan Padios researched Filipino call center agents to examine how global labor processes interconnect with localized identities and to see "how relatability in general, and Filipino/American relatability in particular, are activated and harnessed in transnational call center work"

(Padios, 2018, 58). For Padios, one can deduce how relationality in the digital and global labor market has a colonial resonance that sticks with the worker who is expected to project kindness and build a rapport with the consumer. Although the concept of relational labor is evident throughout the work of content creators on Patreon, there is a deeper interaction that emerges. For instance, practices such as tiered personalized content based on how much one donates as well as early access to pop-up shops help signal an adhesive, stronger bond than merely fans being engaged in a creator's work. Fans begin to not only care about the well-being of their favorite creators but want to support them even when content or products are not being produced. This adhesive bond between creator and fan is where creators are able to showcase how dedicated they are to their most supportive fans who commit a monthly pledge or subscription. In turn, this allows creators to garner support without overly advertising on their social media platforms and help build safety nets and a pseudo-private community in which creators also take mental health breaks and not produce exclusive content and still come back to crowdfunded support.

To show how relational bonding is a deeper, stronger form of content creator-audience connection that occurs on membership-based crowdfunding sites like Patreon, I turn to a chemistry analogy. My use of relational bonding functions as an analogy to chemistry's use of a double or triple covalent bond to signpost the strength of intimacy and support that has formed and is difficult to sever without a severe or controversial interaction (similar to the affect and crystallized honey analogy earlier). With this framework in mind, I want to think of social media sites as providing the raw materials for interactions and relationality to occur (artwork, sketches, and option to be anonymous



when asking questions or giving advice), whereas Patreon or other membership crowdfunding models provides the stronger, double or triple covalent bond connection (exclusive content access, monthly rewards, and promised responses from the creator). My next section will give an overview of traditional crowdfunding platforms and the membership-based crowdfunding platform, Patreon.

## **Overview of Crowdfunding & Patreon**

Conventionally, crowdfunding revolves around receiving small amounts of money from a large number of people in order to gain a preset amount of funds needed for a project or economic relief. Crowdfunding has become a recent corporate or personal fundraising tool with several platforms that a layperson can fundraise on (Macht and Weatherson, 2014) For instance, an artist, entrepreneur, or everyday layperson can set a monetary goal for a project to start-up or concept to be successful. Furthermore, one large donor or investor is no longer needed as thousands of smaller donations will add up. Mathematically, if 2000 people donate 10 U.S. Dollars to a project, that project would have 20,000 U.S. Dollars and would not rely on merely one individual donor with potential strings attached. Initially, the person who started the crowdfunding campaign will reach out to personal friends, families, and social media networks of those involved in the project (Mehlenbacher, 2017). Additionally, the person may purchase advertising space on Twitter, Facebook, or another social media platform to have their crowdfunding post promoted for a short time. Not all crowdfunding attempts are successful or popular; if a crowdfunding attempt fails, the money is often given back to the donator unless otherwise stated in the terms and conditions. Each platform has a policy where the fundraising goal must be reached by a certain date. For Kickstarter and Indiegogo, if a

project does not hit its crowdfunding goal, then the money is returned to potential funders, which usually occurs within 30 days (Kickstarter, 2020; Indiegogo, 2020). If successful, folks who donated will either receive that product, some type of recognition, or a simple thanks because it was for immediate medical or economic relief.

The most notable crowdfunding platforms to emerge within the last decade are Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and GoFundMe. The first two platforms are mostly used for creative or innovative projects in technology, art, and design. Furthermore, creative workers, like artists or social media microcelebrities and influencers, can capitalize on their brand and personality structures that made them successful on their respective platforms (Davidson and Poor, 2014). GoFundMe works differently as it is often used for economic relief like education costs or non-profit charity organizations as well as social justice causes like memorial funds for Black folks who were murdered by the police or for folks who do not have access to healthcare and need to pay for chemotherapy or other healthcare expenses, particularly within the United States (Bassani, Marinelli, & Vismara, 2018).

According to Sunghan and Young-Gul (2016) folks who donate to crowdfunding campaigns generally fall within four categories of funders: angelic backers, reward hunters, avid fans, and tasteful hermits. Angelic backers general are moved by the project's message and do not expect a reward or gratitude. On the other hand, reward hunters donate at a level where they will be noticed by others or receive a specific reward that they want; for instance, donating a certain amount of money may allow them early access to a new product or music album. The third category is avid fans who will donate to projects that they are strongly interested in rather than spreading their interests far and

wide. For instance, scholars have looked at the implications of crowdfunding and fan labor in an attempt to create spin-offs, films, or other content of their favorite media (McNutt, 2013; Pebler, 2013; Scott, 2013; Chin et al., 2014; Stein, 2015). Finally, tasteful hermits are selective in projects they elect to donate but will tend to commit long-term support without providing feedback to the creator. In this vein, conventional crowdfunding donations rarely turn into continual relationships with any feedback between organizer or creator and funder (Regner, 2020). Patreon changes that dynamic by focusing on continual content production, audience interaction, and personalized rewards as well as combining Sunghan and Young-Gul's four categories of funders.

Founded in 2013 by YouTube musician Jack Conte, Patreon provides a direct route for fans to pay the creator on a monthly basis. Patreon serves as a way for creators to receive more intimate interactions with their favorite fans who want to support them. In this vein, Patreon alludes to conventionally crowdfunding models of being initially supported by one's inner network. However, there are conflicting claims on whether Patreon can be considered a crowdfunding platform, or is it simply a membership platform. Indeed, in a 2018 blog post, Patreon asserts that it is not a crowdfunding platform and is rather a "membership" platform (Seitz, 2018). In this chapter, various Communication scholars, and popular press have categorized Patreon as a crowdfunding platform as the essence is on a monthly subscription-based, commodity logic loop regime, which is part and parcel of new modes of recurring crowdfunding (Regner, 2020; Lankoski and Dymek, 2020; *see updated chart below*).

| <b>Patreon Fee Structure per monthly income<br/>(U.S. Dollars)</b> |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | <b>Founder's Pricing<br/>(Before May 7, 2019)</b>       | <b>New Creator's Pricing<br/>(May 7, 2019 &amp; After)</b>                                    |
| <b>Platform Fee</b>  | 5%  | 5% if on Lite Plan<br><br>8% if on Pro Plan<br>(recommended by site)<br><br>12% if on Premium |
| <b>Payment Processing Fee</b>                                      | Varies from 2 to 5 percent (e.g. credit card purchases) | If donation is:<br>\$3 or less: 5% +10 cents<br><br>Over \$3: 2.9% +30 cents                  |
| <b>Payout Fees</b>   | Varies  | Varies  |
| <b>Conversion Fees</b>   | N/A   | 2.5%, if outside creator's home currency  |

**Figure 5.2:** Chart showcasing Founder's Pricing vs New Creator's Pricing change that was implemented on May 7, 2019.

Figure 5.2 demonstrates that a creator will be in either the “Founders Pricing” or “New Creator's Pricing” (Patreon, 2020). If a creator joined prior to May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, they would be part of the “founders pricing” and receive 85 to 90 percent of the total donations each month; the fees were broken down into a 5 percent platform fee for using Patreon, a varying payment processing fee ranging from 2 to 5 percent, such as those who use credit cards for their monthly donations, and a payout fee to transfer the monthly donations directly to one's bank balance, PayPal account, or Payoneer account (citation).

Depending on the geographical location of most of their patrons, a creator in the Founders Pricing may elect to be under the New Creator's Pricing. For creators who joined on or after May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, there is an additional currency conversion fee if the currency is outside one's home currency upon monthly payout. Furthermore, Patreon now charges a flat payment processing fee based on one's pledge audience, where if folks are earning larger donations per month, they will be charged less of a fee. Most notably with the New Creator's Pricing is the platform fee being split into three distinct plans— Lite, Pro, and Premium. In a 2019 rebranding attempting to shift the popular discourse of Patreon as a crowdfunding platform to a membership platform, these plans include Patreon supported workshops. If a creator signs up for the Lite plan, they will receive access to Patreon workshops, their own creator page, and pay a 5 percent monthly fee to be on the platform, but will not have access to create membership tiers like Founders Pricing. By joining the Pro Plan at an 8 percent of one's monthly income earned on Patreon, creators get access to those lucrative membership tiers, priority customer support, and unlimited app integrations to support their work; this is the recommended tier by Patreon that "provides a meaningful income for you and a rewarding experience for your biggest fans" (Patreon, 2020). Finally, the Premium Plan for 12% includes all of the aforesaid and allows for Team Accounts and one to sell merchandise to their memberships. Generally, new creators from May 7, 2019, onwards can expect to receive 80 to 85 percent of the total monthly pledge amount while Patreon takes 15 to 20 percent for fees and hosting services. In comparison, platforms like YouTube take around 30 percent for fees for each subscription or sponsorship and Twitch takes 50% for each

monthly subscription (Alexander, 2018). As such, a combination of platforms are often used by creators to generate more profit and build community across platforms.

For content creators to be successful when first starting on Patreon, they must develop their credibility and reliability by delivering timely and personalized rewards. In their independent research project, Marcus Schmidt analyzes the rhetorical situation and construction of ethos on Patreon. By analyzing how content creators lived up to their promise of additional work and meeting their tiered goals, Schmidt deduces that there is a general lack of social media self-promotion for Patreon (Schmidt, 2017). Creators will often have a short 10 to 15-second mention of their Patreon at the end of their video, blog, or live stream along with the names of every Patron who. Also, this short mention will emphasize how the audience can support additional projects and consume new music, art, or other projects slightly earlier than the public. Outside of this short mention, the Patreon is not promoted. Indeed, Patreon can serve as an alternative crowdfunding structure in place of advertising-based business models (Regner, 2020). As such, Patreon serves as a crowdfunding platform that allows musicians, artists, and other content creators like Surfi to receive a monthly income based on their Patrons' donations or pledges. When creators make a Patreon, they will establish their specific content, like fanart, podcasts, or music covers, and tell their supporters what rewards they can receive. When a content creator becomes well-known as a micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008) or Internet Celebrity or Influencer (Abidin, 2018), they will sometimes establish a Patreon for an additional, steady income that platforms like YouTube fail to provide (Regner, 2020). To entice their followers from tumblr, YouTube, or other social media sites, creators will establish a tiered reward system where, for instance, a person will pledge

USD 1 to get access to exclusive posts or pledge USD 5 to get a monthly computer wallpaper reward. Essentially, the more money one pledges to their favorite creators, the more rewards they will receive. Patrons are billed at the first of each month for all their pledges and receive rewards and personalized messages directly from the creator. Patrons can revoke their pledge at any time, which tends to cause problems for creators. Most notably, a person who wants to view paid content can pledge USD 1 and then remove their pledge without being charged unless the creator requires them to pay upfront.

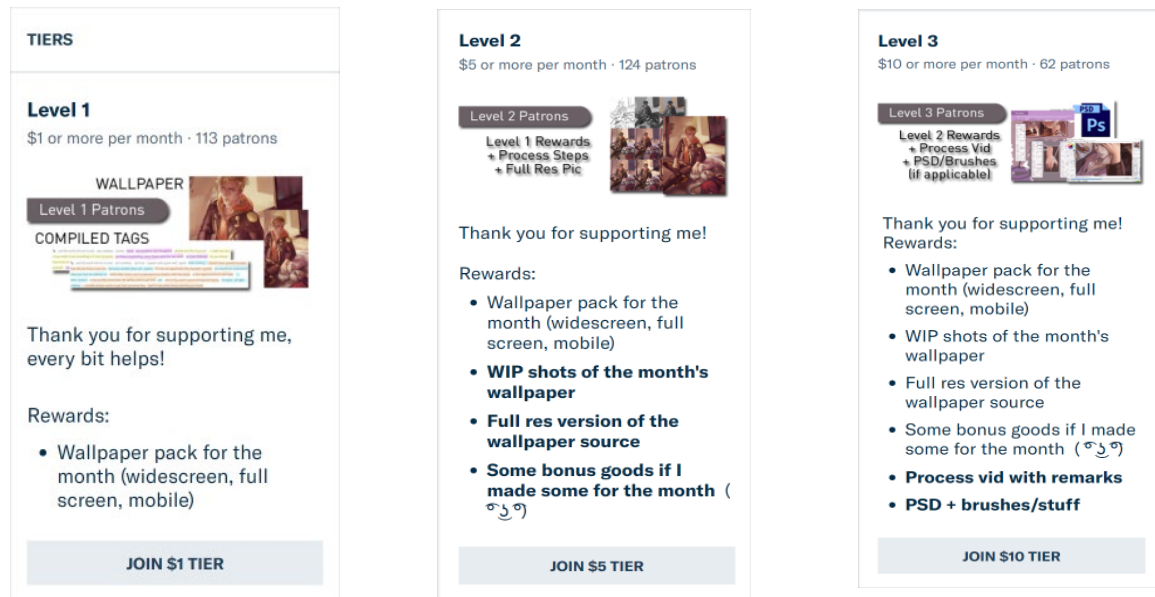
Before concluding this section, it is crucial to note that Patreon does not support hate speech, active harm of any kind, and white supremacists. Patreon was in the spotlight in mid-2017 for purging gun-rights activist and open-source gun design advocate Cody Wilson as well as other far-right figures and white supremacists from the platform. As a result, an invite-only and rather short-lived website dubbed Hatreon was created and followed a similar model of taking five percent of a white supremacist's monthly earnings. It was to serve as a crowdfunding attempt for those who were banned from Patreon as well as Kickstarter, IndieGoGo, and PayPal but was quickly removed from public search engines by the end of 2017. Hatreon was reportedly receiving \$25,000 U.S. a month (Popescu, 2017), until Visa, which was the platform's payment processor suspended all financial services by 2018 (Michel, 2018). This type of membership-based crowdfunding platform does not engage with the relational bonding strategies I have posed in this chapter. Instead, Hatreon and other white supremacist membership-based crowdfunding platforms or freemium (free to use but a small cost for premium features or content) platforms are not concerned with lasting support or connecting with one's audience. Indeed, platforms like aforesaid are focused on projecting a message that many

Trump-era republicans feel stymied through mainstream media and mainstream social media sites. As such, since Patreon does not condone hate speech or potential violence towards a community, this chapter is not concerned with off-shoots of the Patreon platform.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the sketches and answering questions that Surfi does on their tumblr is unpaid labor in order to build lasting, intimate relationships with their audience. It is crucial to note that not all relationships from unpaid work develop into crowdfunded support. Fans may pledge for a month or two and then stop providing funds to Surfi because the content or products are not catered to their needs or desires. Indeed, the strong relational bonds that form occur during the pledge time on Patreon. Creators and fans solidify bonds through constant interaction, voting, and ideas on Patreon. Thus, the exclusive, relational labor that creators like Surfi engage with on Patreon signals the potential to build strong relational bonds that support a creator's monetary means and mental health as well as crowdfunding becoming a mode for the audience to receive personal interactions and content access from their favorite creators. My next section will dive into the first relational bonding strategy—how personalized content is tiered.



## Strategy 1: Tiered Personalized Content

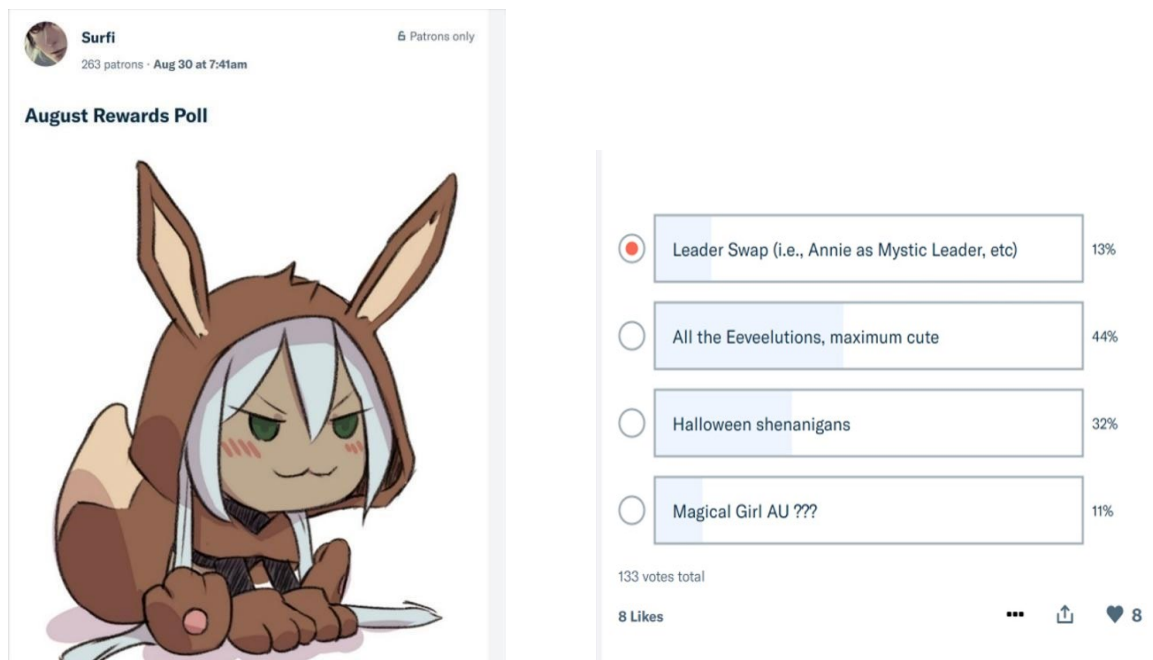


**Figures 5.3 (Left to Right):** Surfi's 3-tier reward system. Levels, rewards, and Patrons as of October 2018.

The first strategy to form relational bonds on Patreon is the creation of a tiered-reward system. When Surfi established their Patreon in 2016, they created various monetary goals (500, 750, 1000, and 2000 U.S. Dollars of support) for themselves and tiered personalized content based on one's pledge. Capitalizing from their virality in 2016 from the Pokémon GO phenomenon and maintaining over 200 patrons for two years, figures 5.3 display the rewards that Surfi will send out in a .zip file at the end of each month. The first tier or level<sup>1</sup> is if one pledges \$1 U.S. or more a month and will receive that month's community voted upon wallpaper for their computer or mobile device as well as a list of all the tags Surfi used on their Tumblr for the month. The second tier requires one to pledge \$5 U.S. or more each month, in which they will receive the first-

<sup>1</sup> I use the terms tier and level when discussing Patreon rewards interchangeably as Surfi uses them interchangeably.

tier rewards plus additional work-in-progress sketches or shots, a full resolution of the wallpaper, process steps for how the wallpaper of the month or comic panel was sketched, and possibly some bonus goods or the commonly used community slang, doobby (Not Safe for Work Content of the Pokémon GO Gym leaders). Currently, Tier 2 is the most popular reward that patrons sign up for. Finally, the third tier requires one to pledge \$10 or more each month. As a result, Surfi will send their Tier 3 patrons all the rewards from previous tiers as well as a process video sped up by 32 or 64 times to show how the illustration was done and give step by step comments on the month's featured artwork, which Surfi calls "Artist Talk." The tiered personalized content not only creates a feedback mechanism (Regner, 2020) but also forms monthly rituals between creator and patron to solidify "strong communicative rapport" (Padios, 2018).



**Figure 5.4:** Every month, Surfi posts a poll for all their patrons to vote on the monthly rewards.

A monthly ritual for patrons is to vote for the month's wallpaper. Patrons of all tiered levels gain access to voting and will get a notification via e-mail when a new poll is posted. Once one pledges at least \$1 U.S. a month, they become a patron and gain access to most of the paywalled content, see exclusive posts and interactions that do not occur on other social media platforms, and, most importantly, gain voting access. Although creators vary in where they place voting access when creating membership tiers, Surfi has it at the minimum of merely being a patron so everyone can vote. Furthermore, each vote is equal regardless of the membership tier pledge one belongs to. In Figure 5.4, we see that 133 patrons, including the author of this chapter, voted on a monthly reward wallpaper theme. Although seemingly mundane, this patron monthly ritual provides a key tenet of relational labor practices— “the ongoing sense-making needed to understand yourself, others, and the relationships you are building” (Baym, 2018, 20). Indeed, patrons are able to converse among each other and with the content creator and can also persuade others to pool together for a particular reward that month and whichever receives the majority vote is the theme that Surfi will create and send out for their patrons.



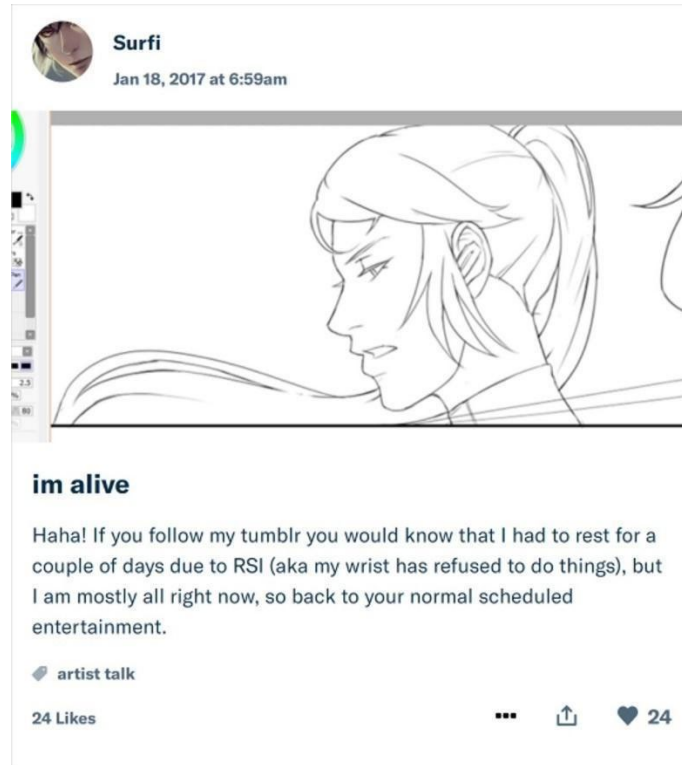
preview. This preview can lead to a pledge jumping a tier and donating more money for more personalized content. Unlike previous one-time crowdfunding attempts, there is a constant deliverable that is provided to patrons. In a sense, patrons, regardless of membership tier, are receiving VIP treatment or as Lankoski and Dymek (2020) call it “a backstage pass” for content. When asked how Patreon has served them as a platform for their paid creations and the work they experience, they said,

It’s a second job! I’m not comfortable at this moment making it my sole source of income. Patreon won’t give me severance if they somehow fold or close my account, lol. Patreon is an incredible crowdsourcing platform and has definitely changed the landscape of online creators. Years ago, sure, you had recurring PayPal payments, then hosting content and email for your supporters, but Patreon had all those centralized into a [sic] easy to digest package for creators and fans alike. It is convenient and that is super important (personal communication, 2018).

This beginning of Surfi’s testimony relates to the precarity of crowdfunding even on membership-based platforms. Given how platforms can censor pornographic content and ban one’s account or that fan creations have often been extracted by the corporation for free publicity before filing a copyright claim, Surfi’s concerns are reasonable. The second half of Surfi’s testimony, however, praises Patreon as a game-changing crowdfunding platform as it makes the process recurring and convenient. This praise is dubious as it conceals the need to being always on, personalizing content, and making sure one’s fans are happy in order to maintain the relational bonds that sustain membership-based crowdfunding. Indeed, since the 2008 financial crisis, work and creation has been reconfigured to support loving one’s job, being flexible with hours, and taking on risks (Neff 2021, in Duffy, 2017; Johnson and Woodcock, 2017). Patreon produces the conditions for what Duffy calls aspirational labor to occur, which is often future-oriented and progressing with one’s career across platforms. Additionally, the work required shifts

how crowdfunding is obtained as traditional crowdfunding models produce one product whereas membership-based crowdfunding provides tiered and multiple deliverables to fans. Indeed, Surfi abides by the logics of loving their job and being flexible with their hours, but this type of work emphasizes the complicated logics of platform capitalism. Platform capitalism here showcases how Patreon allows Surfi to conduct their business for a small, monthly fee. In lieu of human resources mediation or mental and physical health benefits, this work on Patreon has the creator(s) in charge of constructing their own benefits and time off. In other words, this complex reward system as one relational strategy in unison with how Patreon centralizes the crowdfunding process signals a type of love needed for one's job and fans while engaging in the cognitive work required to keep their fans bonded to their content and provide benefits. Surfi utilizes various relational strategies in order to build benefits such as extra compensation or bonuses and taking time off, which my next section will address. My next section will dive deeper into this dubious mode of production by analyzing consistent updates, casual posts (also known colloquially as shitposting), and apologies that are required in order to preserve crowdfunding support when the creator falls behind schedule on deliverables or simply wants time off.

## Strategy 2: Routine Updates & Apologies



**Figure 5.6:** Surfi updates their patrons on their Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) as the reason they have been so quiet the last few days.

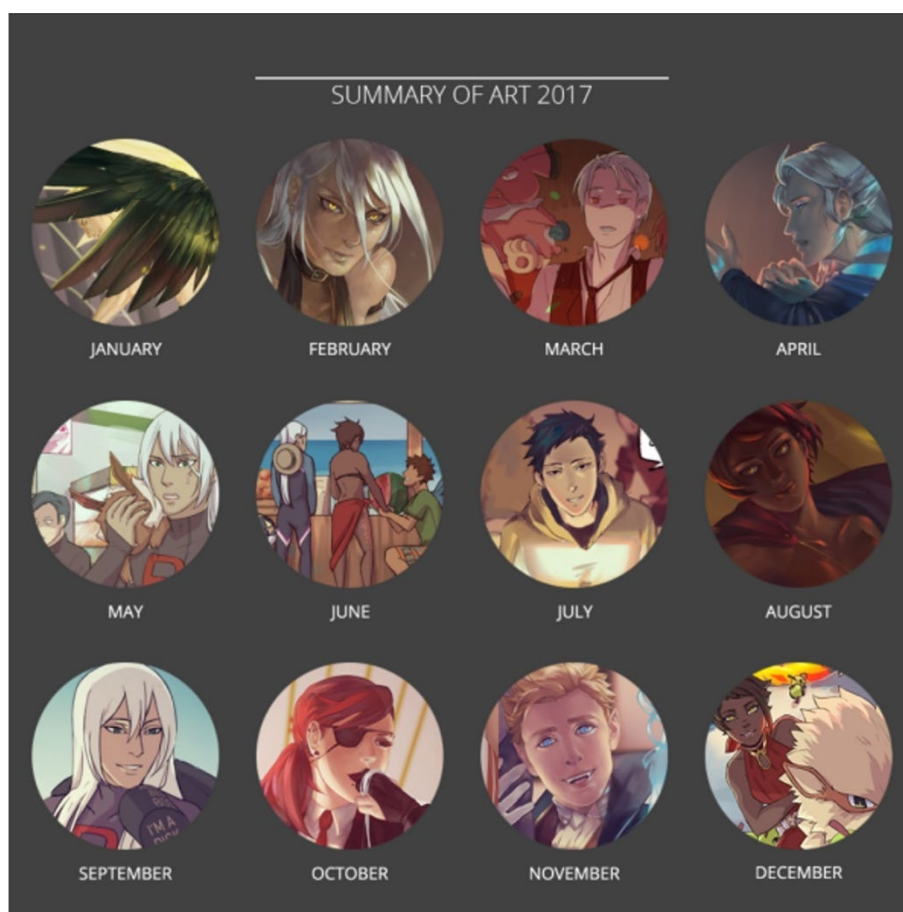
A Patreon creator is expected to consistently update their audience with their works-in-progress for each reward cycle. Indeed, constant updates ensure that patrons interact with the materials and that they can provide feedback or suggestions to the creator for future content. Furthermore, Surfi and other creators engage in these routine updates as they provide traction for the steady increase of patrons increasing their pledges and joining higher membership tiers (Regner, 2020). It is not merely enough to post works-in-progress, but there is an imperative to also post about one's personal life or adversities. In figure 5.6, Surfi begins their post with a simple "im alive." They explain that their recent silence and not posting any content was because of an RSI flare but now can get back to regular content production. As scholars have rightfully noted this

aforesaid testimony is bound up in politics of being a productive neoliberal citizen as well as portraying authenticity to one's audience and fans (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Abidin, 2013; Duffy, 2013; Abidin and Ots, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Poyry et al., 2019, Guarriello, 2019). This section analyzes how these routine updates and apologies become part of a relational bonding strategy under the politics of authenticity in order for the creator to maintain membership crowdfunding, the potentiality of increasing donations from patrons, and construct a safety net if time off is needed for one's mental health.

The routine updates and apologies on Patreon inhabit what Crystal Abidin has called porous authenticity. According to Abidin, porous authenticity highlights the "more secret, more genuine, more real 'real lives'" of creators and microcelebrities (Abidin, 2018). The fact that Surfi conveys their RSI to their audience signals a trust or deep closeness to their patrons as they do not disclose this information on their public-facing platforms like tumblr or Twitter. Furthermore, and a bit more dubious, is that the need to disclose a more real "real lives" of a creator creates a constant loop of updating work by posting in progress or unfinished sketches as well as revealing a disability or illness and updating one's mental health status to continue to emphasize the creator is being productive. Indeed, this type of porous authenticity highlights productivity or making-up lost work time is valued by Surfi's patrons. Surfi's patrons, of course, want them to simply feel better and take time to rest, but still want exclusively produced artwork that they are paying for (personal communication, 2018). In another instance, starting in 2018, there were several Patreon posts about being behind on content in which Surfi has expressed apologies for not being as motivated or producing as much art for their patrons. In order to compensate for the lack of art some months, Surfi allowed patrons to claim a



higher tier reward or, if one was already the highest tier, claim a personalized, yet simple sketch of two Pokémon GO characters, one Pokémon, and a backdrop, like a Pokémon Lab. Most patrons saw this extra work and personalized gift as a kind gesture from Surfi, however, this extra work is bound up in neoliberal politics of feeling intense emotions of guilt for not being productive or potentially squandering more income. This porous authenticity under the brutal, global logics of neoliberalism is where patrons see the true, complexing life of Surfi being spotlighted and how committed Surfi truly is to their patrons. This is highlighted further when discussing their full-time software engineering job and posting a yearly Patreon summary.



**Figure 5.7:** A year-end summary of Patreon exclusive wallpapers for 2017.

Several times, Surfi has also revealed to their patrons that they are working a full-time job as a software developer, especially when they were entering crunch season.

When probed for how they balance between full-time work, updates, and rewards, Surfi said,

I ration my time very strictly and my full-time job takes priority. But, admittedly, there have been times where I've taken personal vacation leave because I know I have to catch up on tumblr and Patreon. I guess it still gives me a weird feeling that people give me money for the stuff I make on a monthly basis regardless of what it is, so I do my best to be on par and make the good shit (personal communication, 2018).

This testimony as well as the imperative to illustrate a yearly summary (figure 5.7) of work along with divulging that they work another full-time intensive job in subsequent posts aligns with the neoliberal narrative of highlighting productivity in order to form authentic and lasting bonds. Indeed, there is an ongoing sense-making process occurring that is needed to understand yourself (Surfi), others (patrons), and the relationships one has built (Baym, 2018). These bonds ultimately have become strong enough to allow Surfi to even take a month off from work and pause pledges, which notifies patrons that they will not be charged for a month. When asked why Surfi pauses pledges, they said,

I pause pledges once a year, usually in July. I was running way behind on rewards because of convention season and conventions take a long time to prep and I personally wasn't okay with taking pledges for [another] month I didn't make much content for as I could. The strange this is no one asks me why I am behind. It's never happened, which is super cool. The people who follow me know I work so much and they're always all right with me taking a break (personal communication, 2018).

This statement demonstrates that Surfi has built a strong relational bond with their patrons to take a break once a year without losing support. Indeed, within several months, Surfi was able to create the necessary bonds with their audience to resume normal crowdfunding support the month after a pause. Moreover, since early 2018, rewards are

also one to two months behind schedule and patrons are content with waiting while still paying their monthly pledges; according to Graphtreon Surfi maintained at least 240 patrons and had a mean donation of \$4.50 U.S. per patron (Graphtreon). In this vein, Surfi is able to mitigate feelings of precarity and is comfortable enough to take breaks because they have built the strong relational bond needed where fans do not necessarily want a finished or exclusive product each month. Although Patreon is a membership-based crowdfunding approach and thus depends on multiple products each month, Surfi has weaved their own financial safety net through these routine apologies and updates. The dubious side of these routine apologies and updates asserts that the creator must prove that they were working hard (e.g., a yearly summary of art or in-progress wallpaper sketch) previously and need a break for their physical and mental health. My next section will re-visit Tier 3 rewards (artist talk and speedpainting) as a relational bonding strategy by going in-depth about the real subsumption of labor and personalized practices that emerge.

### **Strategy 3: Top Tier Rewards**


If a patron elects to pledge \$10 U.S. a month, they will receive the highest tier rewards, which include artist talk, speedpainting, and all other lower tier rewards. As of October 2018, 62 patrons pledged at least \$10 U.S. a month (minimum of 620 dollars donated from this pledge group prior to fees) to receive the aforesaid rewards. The author of this chapter along with other patrons were compelled to support Surfi at this level because of the time and devotion to personalizing the rewards, inviting us to see their work-process, and illustrating the imperfections of art and creative labor. As such, this section explores two cultural artefacts in regards to relational bonding and neoliberal

modes of work on membership-based crowdfunding platforms—Artist Talk and speedpainting. I pause here to highlight Figure 5.8 as essential reading and viewing for understanding what Artist Talk entails, how it relates to relational bonding and labor practices, and as a prelude into speedpainting later in this section.

surfaçage | 1 May 2018

## Environments


from floor plan to final render  
+ tips and tricks



**Environments** are something I dread. They're honestly a lot of work and as a comic artist, sometimes I feel like intricate ones go to waste as the eye moves over the panels. It is rewarding, though, to see it all come together, and sometimes an environment can tell as much of a story as your actual comic strip. If you think of the background as part of the story rather than just something to fill the space, your audience will definitely pick up on it.

### 1. THINK OF A STORY

An effective background always serves a purpose, whether it's to add to the atmosphere of a piece or to draw the eye to the focal point. My point here in this picture is not to tell you something about Spark, but to show you. In storytelling it's usually a better idea to show, not tell - leave it up to the reader's imagination.



I'VE ALREADY HAD A GOOD IDEA OF THE KIND OF DESIGN SPARK'S APARTMENT WOULD HAVE FOR A LONG WHILE

### PUT YOURSELF IN IT 2.

At this point you'll have a pretty vague idea of what you want to show readers. A good way to flesh it out is to put yourself in the shoes of someone who will be in the environment you're creating.

Here the questions I've asked myself: what kind of house would Spark like? What considerations would he think of? Would he live with someone or have friends over? Would he have pets? Would he be messy or clean? What kind of mood am I going for?

I went for a relaxed weekend afternoon with just Spark and his Pokemon, so the reader can see how he lives.

### 3. LAYOUT

This isn't strictly necessary (you may want to work in a more spontaneous way), but as a comic artist I have the habit of laying out backgrounds so I don't get confused when placing characters/getting the lighting consistent.

Again, remember the story; how would this character arrange his things? What would a day in this place look like?

There is an actual mathematical way to project a blueprint like this into 3D, but eyeballing it is enough for me.



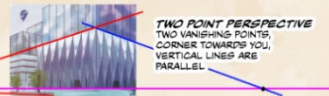
I MADE A SUPER QUICK SKETCH FIRST JUST TO SEE IF THE ANGLE I'M DOING IS GONNA WORK

### PERSPECTIVE 4.

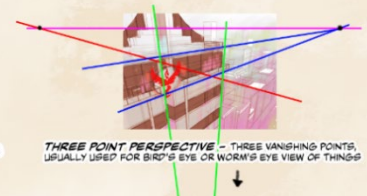
Now we have to pick what sort of perspective we'd want to use for our interior shot. There's a wealth of material out there about the different kinds, but I'll do a quick recap here of the most commonly used.



**ONE POINT PERSPECTIVE** - SINGLE VANISHING POINT, OBJECTS FACE YOU DIRECTLY, QUITE STATIC.



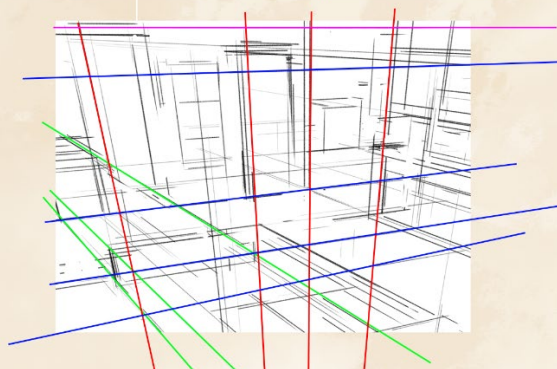
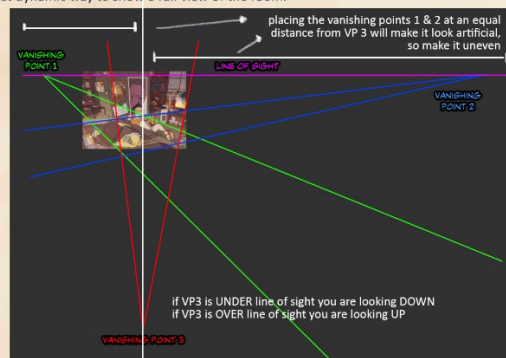
**TWO POINT PERSPECTIVE** - TWO VANISHING POINTS, CORNER TOWARDS YOU, VERTICAL LINES ARE PARALLEL.



**THREE POINT PERSPECTIVE** - THREE VANISHING POINTS, USUALLY USED FOR BIRD'S EYE OR WORM'S EYE VIEW OF THINGS.

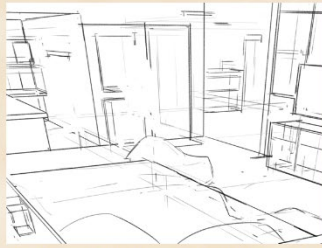
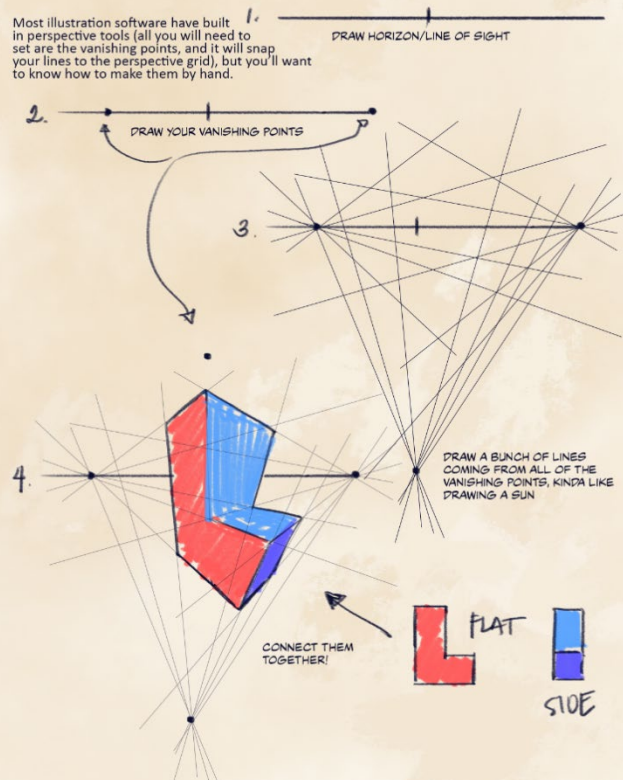
### surfaçage | May 2018

There's another perspective type called curvilinear perspective (fish eye), but we won't be using that here. Interior shots usually go with one-point, but I chose to go with three-point because it seemed like the best dynamic way to show a full view of the room.





Most illustration software have built in perspective tools (all you will need to set are the vanishing points, and it will snap your lines to the perspective grid), but you'll want to know how to make them by hand.



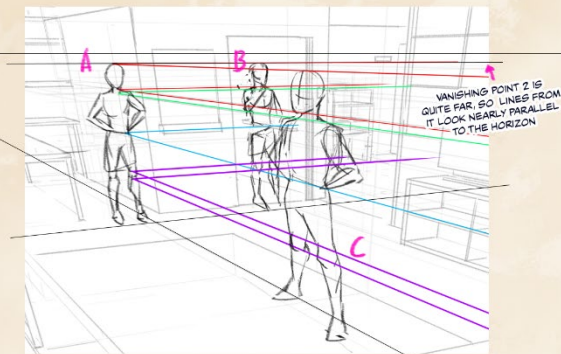
The 3D version doesn't necessarily have to match up with the blueprint, I just used the blueprint to figure out where to place things like the TV and shelves.



QUICK COLOR STUDIES SO I CAN SEE IF THE COMPOSITION WILL WORK

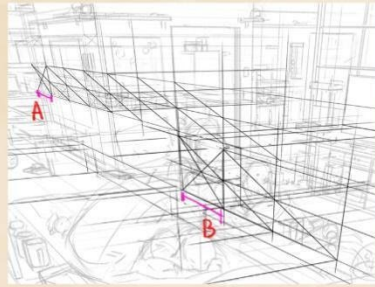
## 5. PROPORTIONS

We now have a room (nice) and now we can put stuff in it. It's fine to eyeball but when you're in doubt, here's some tips to keep your proportions in check.

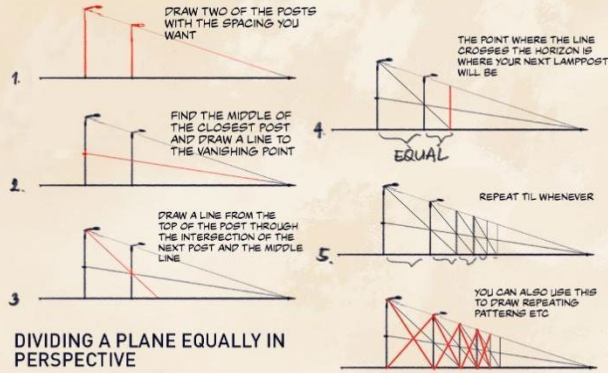


These figures are all the same height, but projected along different vanishing points.

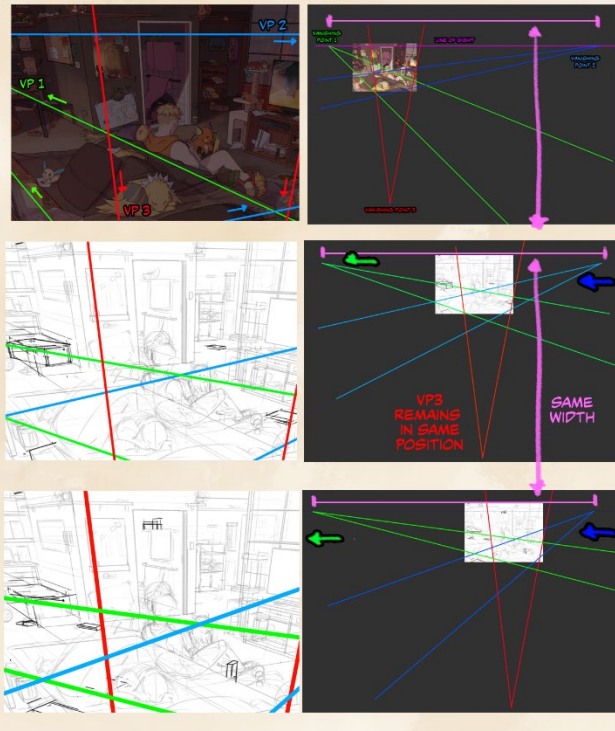
Here, I know the shelf at the back is deep enough to hold a laptop, so it's safe to assume it can be used as a guide to how wide Spark's shoulders are, something that the earlier projection can't show us. We're going to use a trick with diagonals to make a grid framework.



SAY, YOU WANT TO DRAW SOME LAMPPOSTS ALONG A ROAD...



**DEALING WITH TILTED OBJECTS** In real life, things won't always be tidily arranged like they're pushed against the sides of a room. To deal with rotated objects, move your vanishing points.





**Figure 5.8 (read from top to bottom):** May 2018 Tier 3 Artist Talk reward that discusses how to draw Environments from Surfi's perspective.

In Figure 5.8, we see how Surfi provides a detailed step-by-step process of creating realistic environments for their monthly webcomic and wallpaper rewards. As a Tier 3 reward, only a select number of patrons receive this packet to review. Essentially, Surfi takes the time to create an exclusive reward that dives deep into their mind as an artist. In the first panel, Surfi shares how they dislike environments as a cosmic artist because they are often disregarded by the audience and take a lot of time to create. Surfi clues their patrons in that if one makes the background or environment as part of the story then the audience will pick up on it and not gloss over the labor-intensive work. Surfi moves on to quickly discuss the most common perspectives and details how many vanishing points are present and then details the process of drawing one's vanishing points to provide perspective on the creative process. Next, Surfi dives into proportions



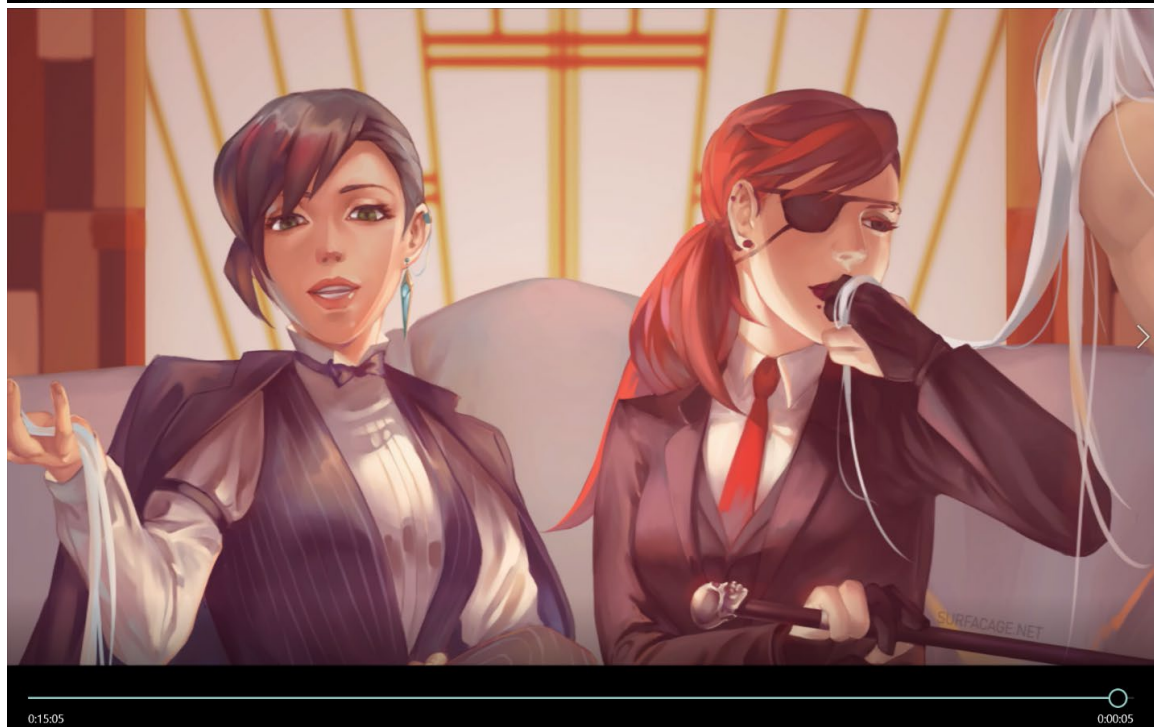
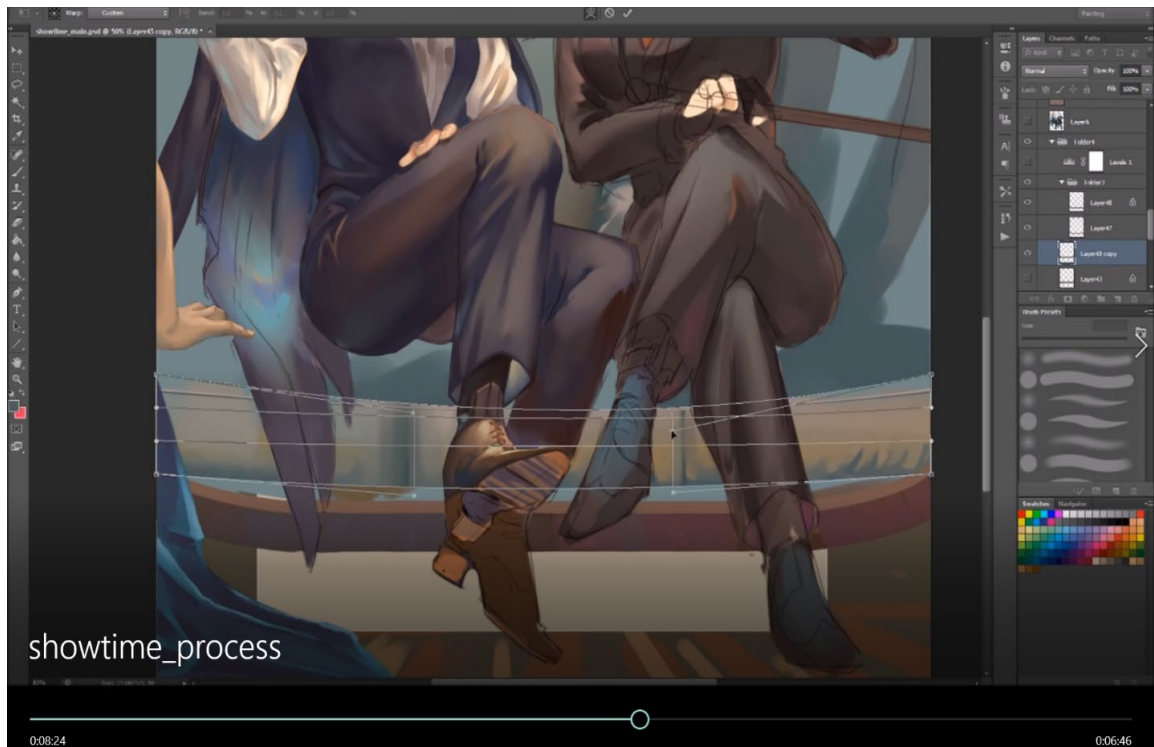
that allow patrons to see how they position characters and other miscellaneous content within the space one just drew. Finally, Surfi details the pencil and inking process where an artist can continue their normal workflow from sketching to shadowing and overlaying prior to the final step of coloring how one desires. This abridged Artist Talk description, in a sense, is how Surfi engages in storytelling that is a co-production of knowledge to solidify relational ties with their most devoted patrons. Each month Artist Talk, for Surfi, will engage in one aspect of the creative process, which is similar to how other content creators will show behind-the-screens and concept development of their works such as musicians, game developers, and pornographic productions.

The Artist Talk reward is thus similar to what Lankoski and Dymek have alluded to of Patreon rewards being backstage passes much like visiting one's favorite musicians (2020). Additionally, Lankoski and Dymek argue that Patreon crowdfunding is not merely product-oriented commodity logic, but more of a community-oriented logic, but here I would like to posit that it is muddier than that. I concur that the rewards, especially the top-tier rewards, are community-oriented logic, but this logic still falls within the realm of neoliberal productivity and demands of online work to produce commodities that are mined from the inner-most consciousness of one's life and then consumed to maintain membership-based crowdfunding. I will turn to speedpainting as another top-tier reward to highlight the convergence of community-oriented logics and neoliberal demands of productivity.

In recent years, artists have done speedpainting (a less commonly used variant is speed painting) videos of popular characters in video games or other popular media venues. Speedpainting is the entire art process sped up to quickly depict from concept

and rough sketches, inclusive of mistakes, to the final, finished product. Indeed, speedpainting provides the audience with the necessary textures, attention to detail and style, and the creator's inner-thought process that goes behind each piece of art. One of the most popular fanart hosting platforms known as Deviantart has defined speedpainting as beauty through imprecision as the mistakes of the artist are on full display and the audience can see the correction being made in real-time (DeviantArt, 2020). Additionally, speedpainting has a popular song or video game background music that aligns with the artwork's theme. Surfi included speedpainting videos in Tier 3 rewards to show step-by-step how they worked on that month's wallpaper. Figure 5.9 showcases three screenshots from a 15-minute speedpaint process video from the October 2017 reward cycle. In this particular process video, Surfi sped up their process in photoshop and overlaid Michael Buble's version of Dean Martin's popular song, *Sway*.





**Figures 5.9 (View from top to bottom):** Screenshots from the October 2017 Patreon speedpainting video with Michael Buble's rendition of *Sway* as the background music. Timestamps included.

Figure 5.9 along with the Artist Talk rewards highlights what Jason Read has theorized as the shift from formal subsumption to the real subsumption.. Formal subsumption was dependent on the length of the working day being confined to a pre-fixed time (e.g. 9 am to 5 pm), whereas real subsumption is dependent and shifting based on technology and production (Read, 2003, 108-109). In his theory of capital transformation from formal to real subsumption, Read is not thinking of the transformation of work or capitalism through a singular or logical cause but how social relations are reshaped to making all types of labor more covert and productive. In other words, real subsumption highlights the intensive labor demands that are expected of creators or other online workers to not only work outside traditional, pre-fixed hours, but also to provide evidence that they or she are indeed working hard for their audience. This working hard for their audience translates into an exchange that strengthens relationality, which is crucial to turn a profit; patrons who pledge the highest tier keep their pledge because they receive insight on how diligent and precise Surfi is while working to produce personalized content. However, this “working hard” and patrons developing a strong relational bond via personalized content with Surfi showcases how membership-based crowdfunding feeds into the crisis state of neoliberalism through the intricate detail to one’s working process. In this vein, the glimpse into the intricate working process and instructing fans on how to mimic their process, Surfi’s Artist Talk rewards become not only a relational bonding strategy but highlights the necessity for creators to constantly show how hard they are working for their fans. The detailed working process through Artist Talk or similar rewards on Patreon allows fans to potentially become digital artists themselves. More importantly, this type of reward has Surfi reveal their inner-psyche and

thought process of an entire sketch and its environments. Devoted fans ultimately pay this monthly fee to see how Surfi's mind works while producing art. This relational bonding strategy ultimately manifests as a way to build strong, personalized relationship with their fans.

Membership-based crowdfunding feeds into neoliberal logics of making one's passion profitable and mining interactions for value by painting it as a form of non-politics and freedom with one's work. In simpler terms, working passionately for one's audience and highlighting each aspect of one's artwork whether it be teaching folks how to draw environments or compartmentalized a 20-hour sketch within a 15-minute speedpaint video with appropriate background music is politicized intensive labor. This showcasing of the everyday artistic process to the audience is Surfi exhibiting how they are truly working hard and hopes for fans' continued support. Surfi or other creators may also exhibit characteristics of feeling not being up to par with their work and thus lose the relational bonds they formed with their patrons. Indeed, Surfi remarked how they sometimes do not feel up to par and said,

I need to get into the mindset before making comics and I can't do the scripting or brainstorming when I'm tired. I can zone out mostly when I have the general pencils of a skit/comic down, but I really am funnier when I'm well-rested or [caffeinated] (personal communication, 2018).

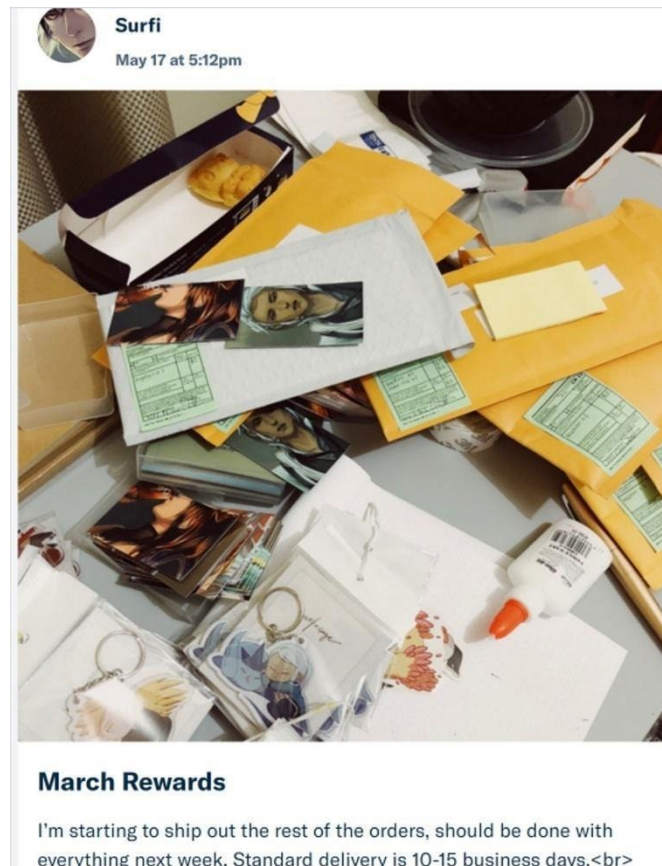
This statement of needing to be in the mindset once again supports rugged individualism and a myth of meritocracy that one should be in control of their workday and habits even if they are spread too thin. In other words, neoliberalism works as a non-politic on membership-based crowdfunding platforms to disavow any structural or economic inequalities or lack of resources by emphasizing that the creator can simply work harder. This ultimately shifts organized labor in favor of what Negri has termed the "factory

without walls” (Negri, 1989), in which all of society, particularly via technological and platform economy shifts, is placed at the point of being mined for value and profit while maintaining precarity and marginalization (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Read, 2003; Duggan, 2003; Ouellette, 2017). As mentioned earlier, Surfi has become behind on awards starting in mid-2018. Although Surfi is behind, there is a bond that has developed that goes beyond rewards and revolves around a symbiotic practice of care. When asked if anyone wanted rewards that were backlogged, Surfi responded,

the strange thing is no, this have never happened in 2017 [when I was behind a month] or 2018, which is super cool. I always lose level 1 tier patrons (USD 1), but I think most, like 200 or 220 plus patrons, just want to support me now. I still shitpost so people get updates from me, just not rewards in a timely fashion this year. My fans know I work really hard, I show it.

This statement emphasizes besides highlighting every single brush stroke or process that goes into the art, neoliberal modes of production and work produce cynically resistive forces in creating one’s own safety net and network of self-care. Indeed, Surfi has had to provide evidence to their Tier 2 and, especially, Tier 3 patrons in order to maintain crowdfunded support each month when rewards are backlogged. Finally, I will explore the fourth strategy of relational bonding on membership-based crowdfunding sites—Pop-up shops.

#### **Strategy 4: Pop-up Shops**



**Figure 5.10:** Surfi preparing shipments for their first pop-up shop in May 2018 and a quick mention of catching up on March 2018 rewards.

The final strategy I observed of creating strong relational bonds on Patreon is the ability to create a pop-up shop with early access for patrons. A pop-up or pop-up store is usually a short-lived retail to sell several limited edition or trendy products. Often times, influencers or microcelebrities will use their virality to create a short-lived webstore for one to get exclusive content, build a brand and deeper connection with audience members, and generate feelings of hype for future content (Rosenbaum, Edwards, and Ramirez, 2020; Rudkowski et al, 2020) In figure 5.10, Surfi shows their work and panda croissant eating patterns while preparing shipments for various keychains, bookmarks, and posters for their patrons all over the world. The pop-up shop is important here as

Surfi and other creators depend on these flash sales to generate additional incoming. By being a patron, one had early access to the store and can claim items before they were available to the public, like tumblr followers; given their virality and asks on tumblr for merchandise, being a patron to Surfi was fortuitous to claim a limited quantity keychain or poster that would otherwise sell out rather quickly. Indeed, the pop-up store was only active for 24 hours when posted publicly indicating patrons had a few days jump to secure exclusive, personalized content. Surfi discussed their first pop-up shop by mentioning,

It had good returns and I learned a lot about my capabilities as a business owner. The logistics of it [like] merchandise sourcing, sorting and packing, and shipping was a huge challenge because I wasn't prepared for the volume or [sic] orders. But I got all the orders out eventually, which is a huge accomplishment because I did everything as one person. It was risky, but I know I have the support to do this (personal communication, 2018).

Besides patrons gaining early access to one-time events, harkening to the idea of an all-access backstage pass, they also see the step-by-step and cognitive process of the creator. Unlike a backstage pass or a meet-and-greet, one is afforded a glimpse into the creative process and caliber of maintaining relationships with one's fans. The pop-up store was a success because Surfi knew that the bonds of support were in place and would be fostered by providing early access to the artwork they produced over two years.

A consequence of the shop was paid content scrapers and stealers. Although Surfi understands that their work is not copyrighted, having folks scraping and posting Patreon content that gets scraped and leaked is discouraging. Surfi alluded that it is most likely the same pledge who created a new account each month and then donates \$1 U.S. and then scrapes the content using xA-Scraper or another open-source web scraper, de-pledges (does not get charged for the month), and then posts it on another website for all



to view for free. Surfi refused to charge upfront as that would potentially reduce some of their patrons or hinder potential new patrons from pledging support as one would be compelled to pay before receiving content access. Although Surfi's content, particularly their art sketches for the pop-up store were scraped, their patrons did not de-pledge and actually expressed support regardless of no deliverable product for that month. After the shop in May 2018 and falling behind on reward deliverables, there was an influx of patrons who expressed that they simply want to support Surfi and see any rewards as a helpful bonus whenever they are released. It is imperative to mention that Surfi's artwork has always challenged the gender binary and ableism by representing non-binary characters and characters with visible and chronic disabilities in their Pokémon GO comics. As a marginalized figure in the influencer and microcelebrity cultures locally and globally, the representation of identities that are not canon or corporately sponsored is crucial to the pop-up shop and maintaining support. Indeed, one can merely print their own free version since the content has been scraped and de-paywalled, however, Surfi brought life to representations to one of their favorite games, Pokémon, that have been denied to many patrons, including the author.

The aforesaid four relational bonding strategies are key shifts that highlight the pinnacle of strong creator-patron relationships with nearly two years of producing exclusive art, tiering content based on patrons' devotion, and routine updates that ultimately culminated in having a pop-up store with early access for loyal patrons. Again, scholars have argued how subscription or membership-based crowdfunding platforms portray themselves as a space for digital creators to have a secure income from their most loyal fans and creative freedom (Hair, 2021). This loyalty allows amateur and famous

digital artists alike to not rely on one-time or a limited set of commissions for income. In essence and to reiterate my argument, this loyalty through the four relational bonding strategies discussed highlights how platforms are able to disavow responsibilities for providing social benefits to their creators while creators are then left constructing their own safety nets and keeping their audience passionate. In other words, creators on Patreon allow the platform to thrive, but protections and benefits for the digital artist are put unto themselves to construct. My final section closes with an exploration of the impact of membership-based crowdfunding and microcelebrity based on the aforesaid relational bonding strategies.

### **Impact of Membership-based Crowdfunding on Microcelebrity**



**Figure 5.11:** Surfi posting how they will be attending an Art Convention thanks to patron support (May 2017).

The four strategies of relational bonding that occurs on Patreon signal a shift in crowdfunding practices from one-time commodity logic to relational, membership-based strategies. The tiering of personalized content, providing routine updates and apologies, an inner glimpse into the intricate art process and the capability of early access to a pop-up store highlights the various strategies for relational bonds to stabilize via Patreon's structural elements. For over two years, Surfi built a strong network that allowed them to expand their artwork. In figure 5.11, Surfi posted that they were going to be a judge and conduct a lecture at the Okun Fiesta Art Convention in Mandaluyong, Philippines. Although crowdfunding on Patreon gave them more opportunities to expand their digital art career, this strength is not necessarily enough for Surfi to leave their full-time job as a software engineer. In other words, the relational bonding processes, for those located outside social media influencer grooming hubs, are more cautious to surrender traditional job security for aspirational work.

The limitations of relational bonding strategies on Patreon are indeed geopolitically based. When questioned whether they would leave their full-time job with all the support, they responded,

I love my fans, but their support would need to at least surpass my tech salary, but I am considering doing more freelance work after I've saved up. I've had to turn down some large contracts because I can't commit to them though, so if I do want to 'make it big' I need to do it [illustration] full time. But it's daunting, financial stability is really big for me. Also, digital art is not really all that popular or mainstream here. There are some workshops or classes I would have liked to attend, but they're based in the U.S.

This testimony emphasizes the precarity around aspirational labor and the postcolonial context of being an internet celebrity outside the United States and United Kingdom paradigm. Even with strong relational bonds among their fans and earning over USD

1000 a month consistently from Patreon, it is too precarious for Surfi to depend on crowdfunding via Patreon and venture into digital art full-time. Indeed, Surfi mentions how digital art is not a living wage in the Philippines folks from abroad trying to break into those markets will have a difficult time. Echoing Brooke Erin Duffy's work on aspirational labor, there is a seduction from platform economies that emphasize anyone can make it if they simply try hard enough and are authentic in their content (Duffy, 2017). As Duffy rightly notes, this kind of ethos shields platforms and corporates from addressing the unpaid, exploitative, and heavily gendered labor that occurs within the creative economy (Duffy, 2017). Padios' work on relational labor for call center agents in the Philippines and how agents must engage in emotionally charged work and build connections with their callers; Padios notes how the Philippines embodies the postcolonial predicaments that are essential to neoliberal globalization (Padios, 2018, 95). Indeed, Surfi must routinely check-in with their patrons and provided personally tailored and exclusive content in order to maintain continued support. Furthermore, their work has to be consistently up to par. The postcolonial predicament here is membership-based crowdfunding, much like the promise of a global neoliberal regime that offers equal opportunity, declares that anyone can "make it big," but fails to provide the resources to do so, like workshops or events that are often held in the United States or the United Kingdom. Surfi is simply not willing to give up their deep relational bonds cultivated on Patreon for an attempt to become a global celebrity or influencer.

Echoing to my argument that creators on Patreon construct their own social safety nets, Surfi is not willing to risk losing close relational bonds for a chance at becoming an influencer. Regardless of compensation, Surfi is aware that influencer status can be

momentary and involves engaging with advertorials from corporate sponsors, selling advertising space on their platform, and personal wares like keychains or shirts (Abidin, 2018). Indeed, Surfi engages in selling wares, but this is through membership-based crowdfunding and serves as a second-job to their stable software engineering job. As mentioned throughout this chapter, Surfi is already engaging in the relational bonding work of constantly checking-in with their fans and ensuring they are happy. Furthermore, there is always the risk of platforms changing payout structures and fans ultimately not being satisfied with the personalized media deliverables. In other words, I am highlighting that membership-based crowdfunding requires a type of relational bonding work that is also informed by one's geopolitical context in which they earn revenue from platforms.

Surfi became a microcelebrity and gained virality after their Pokémon GO artwork in July 2016 added to the lure of the Pokémon GO team leaders and inclusion of the villainous group Team Rocket. Surfi's comics were popular because they included non-binary leaders and villains as well as important characters with disabilities and created an entirely new world for Pokémon GO fans. Surfi used the Pokémon GO phenomenon as a catalyst to gain a large following base that would be compelled to see new comic releases. When Surfi was feeling overworked, they realized they needed to monetize their art to make it productive. As such, they created a Patreon for monthly crowdfunding as the platform provided creators with approximately 85 to 90 percent of their monthly crowdfunded donations. I never heard of Patreon prior to Surfi having a hyperlink and telling us nonchalantly that if their audience wanted exclusive and NSFW art, we could pay USD 1 a month. Given the tiered rewards and routine posting, many

folks, the author included, were willing to pledge at the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Tier level. At first, the rewards, updates, and apologies built the interconnectedness in order to be successful at membership-based crowdfunding. As patrons remained and started increasing their pledges, they would form a social safety net for Surfi so that they can take a month off from Patreon or simply travel for an art convention or vacation. When Surfi has a question about accessibility or pronouns, patrons step up to aid their creative process; when patrons want to know how Surfi draws non-binary characters and takes a gender neutral approach in their artwork, they provided a step-by-step analysis in the Tier 3 reward package. Membership-based crowdfunding has its dubious perils as it consistently mandates the creator to be always-on, maintaining and repairing any and potential relationships, and feeling precarious where the platform can close at any time; however, membership-based crowdfunding also provides webs of reciprocity where patrons support the creator's needs while receiving personalized content that is exclusively for them. In other words, membership-based crowdfunding might be bound up in the neoliberal project, but moments of resistance occur through various modes of relational bonding that has formed among patrons and creator.

In recent years after this research, Patreon has undergone aesthetic and structural changes. In May 2019, they changed their fee structure so that new creators can choose a plan with tools to help them become successful. Although creators who joined prior to this change were grandfathered in with old pricing, this created a schism where creators felt being groomed for success by Patreon instead of simply hosting their exclusive content on the platform. Research on Patreon as a crowdfunding platform is in its nascent stage; future research can consider the impact and whether creators have left the platform

for less influencer or celebrityhood grooming platforms like Ko-fi (a digital tip jar where one can buy their favorite artist a coffee or recurring monthly coffee). Future research can also consider if Patreon's re-branding attempt is successful and is no longer considered a membership-based crowdfunding platform or has moved towards traditional commodity-logic crowdfunding. Furthermore, as of July 2020, Surfi has paused their Patreon indefinitely and patrons continue to check-up on them from time to time. With a mix of platform changes and not being able to go mainstream in the Philippines with digital art, Surfi decided to merely shitpost on Twitter and occasionally on tumblr. This references the notion that relational bonds are not enough when platforms are consistently pushing their creators off their sites and when one cannot receive the grooming to maintain influencer status dependent on their location. Indeed, under neoliberal logics, membership-based crowdfunding platforms attempt to extinguish any potential autonomy that creators possess in favor of promoting entrepreneurialism.

To synthesize, membership-based crowdfunding demarcates a shift from relational building that occurs on social media sites to relational bonding for a sustained, crowdfunded income in exchange for exclusive, personalized content. Shifting from a one-time commodity logic mechanism to a consistent insight into the psychic life of the creator, crowdfunding has become bound up in neoliberal logics. Indeed, the creator must create and predict personalized, exclusive content that will entice their initial audience, especially after one has gone viral or built a reputation. The creator then invests their time in enacting relational labor practices that will be maintained (Baym, 2018; Padios, 2018). Relational bonds have the potential to form through a series of strategies and events that occur while patrons or other crowdfund backers support their creator(s). Once built, these

bonds become hard to break, much like the double or triple covalent bonds (like Ozone) unless a controversial or life-changing event occurs. Indeed, these bonds become so strong that patrons are willing to support a creator who is behind on deliverables or who simply needs a vacation. Ultimately, this shift to membership-based crowdfunding puts creators in a dubious wicket of self-branding, relationality, and experimenting that is part and parcel of neoliberal platform economies while disavowing structural and geopolitical inequalities.



## **Chapter Six:**

### **Conclusion**

### **Gotta Catch Ya Later!**

This dissertation has critically analyzed fame, relationality, labor, and platform economies within the Pokémon GO community. Using the July 2016 Pokémon GO phenomenon as the genesis for this dissertation, I addressed how content creators went viral and maintained their virality, became influencers or microcelebrities on social media platforms, and various labor practices enacted in order to secure a sustained income. It is not necessarily Pokémon GO or Pokémon content that is being analyzed, rather I demonstrate how my digital ethnographic approach allowed me to capture the rich nuances of microcelebrity and influencer culture across various platforms. My findings suggest that when a creator goes viral, their labor practices are transformed so that every social interaction they have with their fans are moments of income or potential sponsorships. My research has argued how creators are expected to be flexible with ever-changing platform dynamics as well as policies that implement new content guidelines and moderation. I have also argued how crowdfunding has been changed from a single, one-time event to a recurring monthly membership in which fans are granted personalized and exclusive content alongside one-on-one communication.

Additionally, this dissertation looks specifically at the everyday people who became full-time employees as content creators for social media sites like YouTube. This distinction is important because it aligns with Brooke Erin Duffy's (2016), Angela McRobbie's (2016), and Elizabeth Wissinger's (2015) conceptions and arguments of how

creative workers or content producers on social media are often engaged in work they are passionate about, yet that work requires them to live precarious social lives. Furthermore, only certain creators, particularly those who are white or white-passing as well as those who converse in English are the most visible (Bishop, 2019). The precarity of work on social media platforms, like YouTube or tumblr, are coated in logics of passion, entrepreneurialism, and flexibility while disregarding workers' access to health insurance, retirement, or mental health. Indeed, this reifies the idea of living a precarious life while putting the onus of mental health within the community. In other words, responsibility is displaced from the platform or governmental policies and put on the creator to generate communal bonds that are strong enough so when the creator asks for permission in order to have a week off from content production, so they can return to their audience without losing fans and revenue.

This dissertation at its core is about gaming and internet cultures stemming from the Pokémon GO phenomenon to interrogate the politics of relationality, platform economies, and personalized media. The latter portion of personalized media relates to how the creator is now expected to always be engaged in the cognitive work of predicting what their audience wants. This cognitive work is where the creator must figure out how their audience responds not just explicitly, but to read the subtext and the “paratexts” produced and commented on across platforms regarding their behavior and content (Consalvo, 2007). My aforesaid comparative case study about social media influencers and micro-celebrities on YouTube and tumblr along with my triangulating digital ethnographic approach was deployed to investigate various platform economies and the future of online work. Throughout my empirical chapters, I have consistently noted how

the future of social media and online work has undergone a continual shift to revolve around what I have called personalized media economies. My next sections will review what I have done in each empirical chapter concerning the three research questions I posed in my introduction.

My research question builds heavily from Nancy Baym's and Ana Padio's use of relational labor as the continual practice of intimacy building and monetizing online relations (Baym, 2018; Padios, 2018). Relational labor focuses on the continual expectation to not only manage emotional expressions for social media or digital work but to constantly be revisiting relationships with one's audience of fans (Baym, 2018). Relational labor highlights a continual process and a trend throughout this dissertation referencing the shift where continued work and sustained income on social media on this practice. I found that the YouTubers were able to engage in this work by having ancillary platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Discord in order to poll and engage their audience's potential interest in the content. This cross-platform engagement proved to be crucial to maintaining their fame and being a flexible creator when transitioning to Twitch for live streaming, which will be discussed in my next section.

Chapters four and five analyzed the fanartist Surfage (Surfi) in order to see how certain practices differed across genres and geographical locations. Surfi engaged in consistent free labor on tumblr in order to build their loyal fanbase after going viral (Terranova, 2003; Stein 2015). Unlike YouTubers, Surfi was able to embrace various "lewd" and queer representations in their artwork because tumblr pre-2018 Not Safe for Work or Adult Content Ban did not censor queer as well as pornographic artwork. As Duffy argues, "the presupposition that realness is a gateway to empowerment has found a

welcome home on social media” (Duffy, 2017, 101), which through unpaid content and continually replying to anonymous questions from fans, Surfi was able to showcase a realness of their personality without ever showing their face. This realness allowed Surfi to ultimately create a Patreon for continued monthly support. Moreover, this process engaged in the expansion of relational labor to relational bonding in which the connection between creator and audience was so strong that the content no longer mattered and the financial support was for the creator to be financially secure. Across my dissertation, this research question found that content creators are ultimately engaging in various forms of relational labor as a standard work process, reaffirming Baym’s and Padios’s use of the term. Furthermore, creators use this relational labor that bolsters personalized media economies. Personalized media economies refers to the creators consistently invoking futurity in order to predict what audiences will want to view or consume next. Personalized media economies put the onus of predictive work, often attributed to algorithmic design, on the creator. Ultimately, the personalization of media economic exchanges is in tandem with relational labor being the norm across social media platforms for a loyal audience and sustained income.

My research and findings interrogated the explicit and implicit policy changes that occurred on YouTube, tumblr, and Patreon throughout my July 2016 through December 2018 data collection period. Particularly, I was curious if these platform changes to policies made it difficult for creators to receive continued financial support from their audience. The constant recalibration of policies that occur on platforms in which certain folks become ineligible to receive compensation is under constant flux and

contributes to social media work being in a state of precarity (van der Nagel & Tiidenberg, 2020; Abidin, 2020).

During my data collection for the YouTubers, the platform did not change entirely, but the demands from uploaded to live content increased. Chapter three closes particularly with a discussion on this rise of live streaming content and argues the need for one to become a flexible creator. The mainstream news of April 2018 about Tyler Blevins, also known as Ninja on Twitch, making 500,000 US dollars after the platform takes their portion drove the lucratively of esports and live streaming into popular discourse. In T.L. Taylor's influential book on esports and the rise of game live streaming, there is growing popularity of at-home broadcasting one's activities and having a group of people watching someone play (Taylor, 2018). Furthermore, the average streamer only begins on average with 3 viewers, which signals problems regarding visibility (Taylor, 2018, Abidin, 2016, Neff et al., 2005).

The research questioned proved to be most pertinent for Chapter four when I analyzed Surfi's use of tumblr as an unpaid temporal investment for future income. In December 2018, tumblr announced an Adult Content Ban or Not Safe for Work (NSFW) ban on any content that was pornographic, inclusive of female-presenting nipples (tumblr, 2018). This directly impacted Surfi's content with artwork that had too much fictional cleavage exposed or close-up views of a fictional character's exposed butt cheeks. As such, they expressed how they would become more active on Facebook and Twitter; to be sure, tumblr as a platform lost over 20 percent of their users within the first month of this ban and creators fled to other sites to provide unpaid and subscription-based content (Tiidenberg, 2019). Surfi expressed how their fans essentially curated and

surveyed their content and would directly message them to inform a piece of art or post was taken down and is no longer visible in their archive or tagging system. Surfi expressed that without their fans, they would be unaware of which content went missing or why their views were decreasing. Ultimately, this linkage between creator and audience dovetails into my proceeding chapter about Patreon. Surfi ultimately created a Patreon because it was a crowdfunding platform for creators to make a sustained income. When Patreon attempted to adjust its fee structure in December 2017, there was blowback from all donators (pledges) on the site. Surfi mentioned how if we (their pledges) wanted to de-pledge support because of the higher fee charges to donors, they would ensure we still receive our rewards. A month later, Patreon reversed course from the fan backlash and reverted their policy changes until their 2019 rebranding attempt to move away from a crowdfunding model (Patreon, 2019).

My first two research questions are closely interconnected and highlighted my argument that content creators are always building relationships with audience members in order to endure the shifting platform changes. In this vein and much like how power operates, platforms shifting policies and structural ecologies generate moments of interdependence and solidarity between creator and audience. A consistent finding during my participant observation, analysis, and interviews was the audience does not want to see their favorite creator depart from the platform and will attempt to support them through one-time donations or crowdfunding platforms like Patreon (Wu, 2020); however, one's lived identity and geographical location are outside the scope of donations or crowdfunding income.

It is crucial to highlight that all of my research questions are porous and they essentially build off of each other in each empirical chapter to answer or analyze a specific phenomenon. My final research question wanted to pose the question around broader political implications under neoliberal capitalism that race, gender, and geographical location have on (not) becoming an influencer on YouTube or tumblr? By offering insight into the work that occurs on and across specific platforms, my study contributes to the extensive scholarship on internet and gaming cultures and fan studies. I offer an understanding that being a successful and lucrative content creator entails enacting various forms of relational labor and becoming a flexible, personable creator. If one cannot make connections via friendship with one's audience, then a career on social media is most likely short-lived. In other words, my research offers insight in how media culture is now revolving around the commodification of friendship on platforms while maintaining worker precarity. Workers are always deemed as self-employed and are thus not offered benefits by these platforms. Furthermore, these platforms do not need to offer protection from harassment, yet can govern the actions of their creators on and off platforms.

This segues into expanding the argument from Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt have asserted that neoliberalism is essentially a "crisis state" (2008). The collective aura of precarity among the YouTubers and Surfi is essential for neoliberalism to thrive and enforce itself as a type of nonpolitics that generates a leveled playing field for all subjects (Duggan, 2003). Furthermore, this feeling of precarity and nonpolitics has been refined after the 2008 financial crisis as the worker is now expected to love or create a passion for their job, be flexible with their hours, and take on risks without social safety nets like

healthcare (Neff, 2012, Johnson and Woodcock, 2017). This kind of crisis state essentially creates a “factory without walls” in which all labor is mined for potential profit. This is crucial for thinking about how the rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism interacts with platform economies, algorithmic design, and social media networks to essentially gatekeep people from becoming influencers and maintaining the myth of meritocracy through working diligently. However, content creators being under precarious conditions and that all forms are mined from profit is not necessarily moments of exploitation. The influencers and microcelebrity I have analyzed through thick description highlights how creators were able to find pleasure and motivations during their work. This was evident when Surfi explained how they could not keep doing a full-time 9-to-5 job along with their artwork without making the latter profitable. Surfi felt compelled to create a Patreon in order to be profitable, but as discussed in chapter five, still produced free sketches. Surfi’s work was pleasurable because they built relational bonds with their fans in order to receive validation about their incredible artwork. The YouTubers that I researched started created ancillary networks on Discord, Twitter, or Instagram in order to secure their brand but also enjoyed producing limited-edition merchandise and taking their fans on expeditions around the world.

Regardless of the relational labor strategies or personalization of media attempts, there are still certain social markers like race, gender, and being outside the U.S.-E.U. social media paradigm that impacts or prevents people from becoming successful influencers in the long term. As mentioned earlier, neoliberal capitalism creates a veil of nonpolitics. Topics such as race or gender are often eclipsed because creators do not want their audience to enter a space they may feel uncomfortable or challenged ideologically,



which oftentimes leads to the exclusion of Black gamers, queer gamers, or women gamers as simply based on natural talent instead of systemic barriers (Gray, 2017, 362). Furthermore, conversations that leave the audience uncomfortable tend to ruin interaction and participation, which ultimately can harm a creator's continued revenue. In other words, in order to maintain an audience and secure income, a creator essentially embodies a nonpolitics of colorblind and post-feminist self to forgo conversations that might be important to them and their well-being. In "Branding the post-feminist self," Sarah Banet-Weiser says,

The promise of media interactivity is not only the promise of collapsing power relations between those who control information and those who consume it; it is also the promise of a new imaginative script, where subject formation can take place on a different kind of playing field, one with new conditions of possibility for thinking about identity formations, such as the gendered body. However, within commercial social networking sites, such as YouTube, the playing field is fraught with contradictions. Self-disclosure in one context can be empowering for girls and, in another, be a form of self-branding that is prescribed by a limiting cultural script (2011).

Although Banet-Weiser is talking about young adults, the logic around revealing and discussing one's gender can cause strife among audience members in understanding the creator's brand. For instance, after the data collection period and nearly 4 years of content production, PkmnMasterHolly finally tweeted about gender and its impact on her Pokémon GO content:



**Figure 6.1:** PkmnMasterHolly breaks her silence in her first tweet explicitly about gender and its impact on Pokémon GO viewership.

PkmnMasterHolly's testimony displays two notions that align with Banet-Weiser's statement around the complexities of media interactivity and self-disclosure as well as a type of post-feminist sensibility that women on social media engage in to be successful. First, the broader implication is that Holly was not able to discuss gender, outside explicit verbal harassment, because it would negatively impact her nonpolitical space and cute augmented reality brand. Second, people admitted they would watch TrainerTips (Nick) or Mystic7 (Brandon), but privately via direct messages that her content was their favorite. This poses a direct economic impact as views, likes, and subscriptions are the crux of Holly's livelihood and mode of obtaining sponsorships. The conjunction of a postfeminist sensibility or nonpolitical approach to gender until one secures their brand along with making game spaces comfortable essentially precludes safer spaces for people of color, women, queer folks, and folks with disabilities from entering and becoming various levels of influencers. Instead of thinking that a person's content is simply bad, it is important to shift the dynamic towards thinking how content is gatekept if it is not curated to maintain the status quo until the worker achieves a level of celebrityhood that they can speak out against injustices (Abidin, 2020).

This dissertation, particularly in Chapter three, noticed a glaring whiteness and English-speaking dominance of influencers and microcelebrities within Pokémon GO.

Although not limited to Pokémon GO, the whiteness and U.S.-E.U. focus of content creators is salient for discussing race on social media. Even though Pokémon originated from Japan, only one non-English-speaking influencer was invited to the 2018 Pokémon GO Travel campaign, Yamada. Indeed, much like tokenism, Yamada's inclusion reinforced that under neoliberal capitalism there is a certain whiteness and English-speaking dominance around who can be visible as an influencer. The Pokémon GO Travel campaign allowed creators to interact with people from different cultures and capture some Pokémon that are only available in locations like Japan, Netherlands, Australia, or India. In essence, the campaign became a type of voyeurism for English-speaking influencers to travel the world, sightsee, and capture Pokémon occupying other people's land without engaging in non-entertaining cultural activities of the native popular. The broader political implications here is that the internet or making money on social media is portrayed as colorblind and anyone can make it as a content producer.

Ultimately, all three research questions have investigated various platform economies, relationality, fame, and expanded the discourse and scholarship around the future of work online. By seeing how there is a continual shift to what I have called personalized media production this dissertation lays out frameworks about labor, particularly making the move away from defining content creators as engaging with emotional labor to relational labor. This dissertation also looked at content creators focusing on correctly predicting what their audience wants to see. This shifts the labor and responsibility of success to the person where it is no longer the corporation's or the algorithm that does the predictive, cognitive work, but instead the creator who take on the additional labor and cognitive work of predicting what their audience will enjoy for

continued revenue. Furthermore, I propose that flexibility, particularly being able to participate and earn revenue on two or more platforms is imperative for continued success for influencers and microcelebrities. My next section will dive into the limitations of this dissertation's methodological approach and empirical analysis.

## **Limitations**

This dissertation has captured a global phenomenon and highlighted various strategies for content creators to capitalize on their virality, the shift from general to personalized content in digital work and gaming cultures, and the U.S. and Eurocentric politics of online fame and branding. Although this dissertation has spent extensive time on small data and unraveling the underpinnings of platforms like YouTube, tumblr, and Patreon in relation to creators' everyday working life, it is not without its methodological and theoretical limitations.



**Figure 6.2:** Picture from the 1<sup>st</sup> annual Pokémon GO Fest 2017 in Chicago, Illinois at Millennium Park, which was deemed the Fyre Festival for nerds.

One limitation of this project was access to interviews for Chapters Three. Although being denied interviews because of non-disclosure agreements or simply not getting replies from YouTube Influencers was used as a data point, this project could have reached a different type of data saturation with more interviews from Pokémon GO influencers. A major factor of this failure was the implementation of the Pokémon GO Fest of 2017 in Chicago, Illinois. Popular media deemed this event as Gaming's Fyre Festival as many folks could not gain access to the park, cellular service around the vicinity was overloaded and crashed, and the 90-degree weather while waiting in line for 6 hours without backpacks, umbrellas, or sunscreen to potentially gain entry culminated in a full refund to attendees (Tassi, 2017). My prospectus stated that I would use the Pokémon GO Fest as a chance to introduce myself to YouTube Influencers and potentially secure an interview or a brief conversation with them at the festival. Since that plan failed and reaching out online did not succeed, my methodological openness allowed me to overcome this limitation. I overcame this limitation to some degree by recalibrating the project to heavily rely on content and discourse analysis and consuming over 1500 hours of Pokémon GO videos to get a consensus of influencer-audience interactions and relational building that occurred.

The most glaring limitation is the lack of surveys *and* interviews with Pokémon GO players who also followed the influencers. The original concept for this dissertation was to also include a place-based ethnography component where I would have talked to Pokémon GO players who followed one of the influencers that I scouted initially and

accompany the player for a week while they played Pokémon GO. The overarching theme was to hold semi-structured interviews or conversational moments after the player and I spent time playing Pokémon GO and discussing how we interacted with the Influencers. In other words, I wanted to play Pokémon GO with other gamers who followed any of the influencers to understand how they incorporated gameplay with media consumption and relationality. During my preliminary defense, my committee poignantly noted that I was trying to do too much and they were right in saying so. As such, I decided to abandon the placed-based ethnographic portion of this dissertation in place of a purely digital ethnographic approach and triangulate several methods within the two-year data collection process. While I was nearing the end of my data collection in 2018, I realized that I could have perhaps interviewed or reached out on YouTube instead of purely just commenting with their folks about their gameplay in Pokémon GO in the comments of videos. This kind of interview strategy was not included in my IRB exemption and I did not want to extend my Ph.D. timeline more than I needed to (six years). I also could not compensate for interviews or even hold a raffle or any other type of compensation for Pokémon GO players who followed particular influencers as I did not have the funding or approval from IRB to do so. I concede that this dissertation, especially chapter three, could have been stronger and reached a different type of data saturation if I interviewed content creators or if I interviewed Pokémon Go players who were following an influencer as I could have solidified reasonings or strategies or engagements that they had with the creator instead of relying on a purely watching and analyzing over 1500 hours of YouTube content as well as scraping over 100,000 YouTube comments and tweets from their account. This interview combined with the

data scraping process would have shown or gleaned more information about the transmedia or cross-platform process that occurs in the building of relationships that become monetized for these influencers.

A third limitation is going to be the sample size, particularly of chapters four and five, and lack of racial diversity among participants, especially in chapter three. Even though chapters four and five continue the sample of one, I shadowed the everyday life for two years on the crowdsourcing website Patreon in order to get an idea of how that platform intrinsically works. In my next section, I will bring this topic up again to mention future research on the platform. I made conscious choices in this dissertation to limit the fan artist section as well as the crowdfunding section to just one participant because I was able to get a rich and detailed analysis of who Surfi was and how they maintained their virality when in a non-Western geographical location than my other research participants. It could have been helpful to have a comparative case study with other fanartists because it is not necessarily a fair comparison to juxtapose YouTubers' geographic location with fanartists on tumblr or other platforms. Also, by focusing on just one participant, the data collection was a process of collecting multiple forms of their work and personality as well as gaining insight from the community that could not have been obtained by spreading or painting a brushstroke approach with more participants. Instead of asking general questions, this dissertation was focused on, especially with the two semi-structured interviews where the first semi-structured interview focused more so on general questions of how Surfi became famous on tumblr how much time were they spending on content creation. The second interview cared more about how they maintained their fame and what they were essentially doing in their everyday life. I was

able to ascertain the importance and the various strategies on Patreon in order to be successful after going viral.

## **Future Research & Brainstorming**

Given the shift from purely uploading content to live streaming, my current research has started to look at the future of work and platform economies in light of this recent phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter 3 with the famous YouTubers, there was a shift away from purely uploaded and edited content for more content that is live streaming or live streamed, which shows the more authentic self of the research of the streamer and worker (Abidin 2016, Taylor 2018). Beginning in 2018, there was a content shift that resulted in hybridization of content production. YouTubers would go from uploaded edited content, solely, to incorporating live streaming on YouTube or other platforms in order to build up and secure their audience for their eventual migration to Twitch, the premier game live streaming platform. YouTube had their own live streaming platform called YouTube Gaming, which was to compete with Twitch (owned by Amazon). YouTube Gaming's most notable feature was its family-friendly options and streams, which would penalize streamers if they marked their content as safe for kids, but used profanity or other crude languages (YouTube, 2018). Furthermore, the live community on YouTube in relation to Pokémon was primarily concerned with shiny hunting, which entails finding a different colored Pokémon from the usual color at a very low rate, usually 1 in 8000 chance (Merrick, 2021). Because of this specific gaming environment and dynamic, many Pokémon GO content creators saw the need to expand to live streaming and stream exclusive content on Twitch in attempts to become a partner on that platform as well. Indeed, my research project that was published in *New Media &*



*Society* was in response to this uploaded, edited content to live streaming shift that I saw occurring. My article “Never Give Up, Never Surrender: Game live streaming, neoliberal work, and personalized media economies in YouTube Gaming analyzed how new forms of paid emotional labor intersected with traditionally feminized demands of unpaid attentive and caring work to benefit the already most successful creators and streamers (Guarriello, 2019).

My future research also looks the everyday amateur nonprofitable streamers, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, I have begun working on what seems to be several journal articles or a book project that is focused on illegal gaming private servers such as MapleStory and World of Warcraft. To reiterate, it is not nearly about the game itself as one can infer from this dissertation; this dissertation used the Pokémon GO phenomenon to investigate the deeper politics of platform economies, the future of work on social media platforms, and how relationships become built for monetization and emotional support. Unlike influencers or microcelebrities, the ability to access certain workshops, like YouTube space, or talent agencies or agents affects the ability for those starting out to become potential influencers and is extremely lucrative. Furthermore, some folks wish to share their content for “content’s sake” (personal communication, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, folks have taken to risk reduction and social distancing by strengthening their communicating and meeting online for casual interactions (Kwok, 2020; Meza-Palmeros, 2020). Furthermore, since the pandemic began, every live streaming site or service, like Twitch, YouTube Gaming, or Zoom, grew exponentially (Stephen, 2020). Indeed, hours watched on Twitch went up by 50 percent from March to April 2020, which resulted in 1.645 billion hours watched a month

(Stephen, 2020). Since more people are watching live stream programming than ever, it is important to interrogate how casual streamers via illegal private servers, as those are often banned from going live on streaming platforms that you can earn revenue from, and what practices are casual streamers engaging in to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic via community and non-profitable live streaming.

Another future project can be a detailed analysis or extension of chapter five, which looked at Patreon. In particular, a wider sample size analysis would be appreciated as that chapter used a sample of one. Furthermore, when I looked at Patreon from 2016 until the end of 2018, the platform was (and still is) by many artists, musicians, and other content creators as a crowdfunding platform even though the platform itself perceives itself as a membership platform. Indeed, in 2019, they have tried to rebrand as a crowdfunding platform as seen by their policies and fee changes and this would be requiring a wider sample size to investigate and compare on how content creators in the founding pricing system to those forced in the newer pricing system. It would be fruitful to see how this platform change has that impacted various content creators as there is a need to advertise one's Patreon, especially if it is related to pornographic content. Again, when doing qualitative research, the biggest critique is about sample size; however, researching about one person becomes so crucial because the platform or other internet entity one is researching is unstable and constantly changing. Furthermore, I was able to get an excellent exploratory view of the actual research field with the research topic before engaging in a larger study that can either expand or correct what has been previously researched; in other words, my research on Patreon is not outdated or irrelevant but needs to be updated in order to see the impact of platform changes. It is

crucial not to think of qualitative research as weaker if it has fewer people, but in fact, having fewer people within a study can provide deeper insights depending on the method(s) used (Stake, 1995; Patton, 2015, p.22). A larger study of Patreon should include over 30 content creators or musicians and would require attention from multiple researchers across academic disciplines as well as multiple years of trying to engage in the everyday life of these creators because a key part of research and methodology for understanding Patreon is how to make sure that the participants are gleaning insight about the inner workings of neoliberal capitalism on their life.



**Figure 6.3:** A screenshot from the Tanya DePass & Stacey Abrams stream discussing Voting, Heritage, & Georgia Run-off Election in January 2020.

Finally, I want to research the rise in political culture or the power of politics within gaming and live streaming. When I began this dissertation research in the middle of the now-infamous 2016 U.S. Presidential election, content creators were often silent about politics of race or gender. However, after the 2016 election, a lot of content

creators, influencers, and microcelebrities started to feel compelled to mention or discuss racism or sexism within their communities. Popular additions to YouTube descriptions or ancillary chatting platforms like Discord mentioned that there would be no room for any kind of hatred, discrimination, or verbal harassment to anyone within that space. Since the start of this dissertation and the conclusion of the data collection at the end of 2018, a lot has changed about gaming's role within politics. This is particularly salient for the 2020 election where we saw a rise in not only live streamers who do it as their job or side hustle, but we see how politicians have used streaming as well. For the 2020 election, we saw Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez live stream the popular game *Among Us* on Twitch and she became the biggest amateur live streaming event on the platform at the time of writing. Her stream was a campaign to get out the vote, particularly for those in Generation Y (Millennials) or Z (Zoomers). Additionally, prior to Nintendo's ban on political content, the Biden-Harris team created "Biden Island" in the popular game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. The island was for fellow players to interact, gain exclusive merchandise like in-game shirts, pins, or posters to bring to their own island for others to view. Finally, a third example is before the Georgia Senate runoffs in January 2021, Stacey Abrams and streamer Tanya DePass discussed the politics of voting and heritage in relation to the run-off elections while playing *Animal Crossing* and publicizing it with the hashtag, #GamersWhoVote.

Indeed, the focus of this dissertation has been about platform economies under neoliberal capitalism and how content creators are pushed in individualized and entrepreneurial ways. This mode of work disavows corporations and the state from social responsibility and prepares an entire generation to be without any social safety nets when

they are no longer able to stream or work. Furthermore, this reifies the traditional logic of lifting oneself by the digital bootstraps because they have to be constantly engaging and maintain the flexibility that requires them to remove one shoe and put on another given the scenario. In other words, individual neoliberal demands have expanded because gaming and internet cultures require the individual to be constantly engaging and mitigating their own behaviors to match their audience and fans. In closing, I want my future research to resonate and engage with casual gamers or marginalized online celebrities, particularly those who identify within the LGBTQ spectrum, to interrogate what the future of work *feels* like for them. Generation Z is perhaps the first generation where a 9-to-5 job is not the expected goal or option after one finishes their educational training. I want to contribute to academic scholarship the theories and experiences of everyday lives of folks who are creating communities of interdependence to survive under the new expectations of capitalism and how they have cultivated their own safety and support networks. In essence, I plan to continue to use and develop my research to contribute to larger conversations about identity, everyday life, digital culture, and the politics of work online.

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## Appendix A: Twitter Request from Library of Congress

### Question History:

Patron: Chat Transcript: Hello, I am a PhD Candidate at the University of Minnesota. I am doing research on various social media and audiences' labor practices. I was wondering, do researchers have the ability to access the Twitter archives?

Librarian 1: Librarian 'Librarian 100998' has joined the session.

Librarian 1: Good afternoon

Librarian 1: Here's a canned script that we have for Twitter questions:

The Twitter Archive has been transferred to the Library of Congress. The Library will make an announcement when the collection is available for research use.

The following links provide background information regarding the Twitter Archive:

-Update on the Twitter Archive at the Library of Congress

< <http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2013/01/update-on-the-twitter-archive-at-the-library-of-congress/> >

-White Paper on the Status of the Twitter Archive at the Library of Congress

< [http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2013/files/twitter\\_report\\_2013jan.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2013/files/twitter_report_2013jan.pdf) >

Librarian 1: Huh, I'm sorry the HTML markup didn't work right.

Patron: Oh thank you for these.

Librarian 1: The short answer is that it is not yet available.

Librarian 1: If you would like someone who works with it to respond, though, I can transfer your question and they'll get back to you by email.

Patron: Oh, I see. Is there any recent updates or possibility it will be in the next year or so?

Patron: That would be great if you can transfer me to that person. thank you

Librarian 1: I don't have any additional information, I'm afraid.

Librarian 1: I will be glad to transfer you. Have you looked into other ways to gather Twitter data?

Patron: Yes, I have. I am doing scraping of data but so far Twitter caps me at 18,000 tweets at a time or 2 weeks back.

Other ways is manual, but my computer nor my school's computers have the capability to scroll for that long w/o running into memory (RAM) issues.

Patron: Yes, I have. I am doing scraping of data but so far Twitter caps me at 18,000 tweets at a time or 2 weeks back.

Other ways is manual, but my computer nor my school's computers have the capability to scroll for that long w/o running into memory (RAM) issues.

Patron: sorry for double send (our wi-fi is acting up)

Librarian 1: No problem.

Librarian 1: One project I know about is Documenting the Now, at <http://www.docnow.io/>

Librarian 1: Ed Summers, the technical lead, may have some good advice for you on getting your own scraping to work.

Patron: Oh thank you for this tool! I did not know about that. I've been using NCapture and NVivo and Scraper so far.

Patron: Oh, that would be fabulous! I would love to learn some more. Can you pass my e-mail along to him?

Librarian 1: I think you can just contact him directly. Hang on.

Patron: Oh, I see that on the docnow page!

Librarian 1: Yes, if you go to the "team" tab and click on his name, an email opens up.

Librarian 1: If that doesn't work, look at [mith.umd.edu](http://mith.umd.edu), where he works.

Patron: Thanks so much for all this information

Librarian 1: You're welcome. I'll also forward your question in case there is anything else someone can offer about the status of the Twitter archive here.

Librarian 1: You'll receive a transcript of this chat when we're done.

Librarian 1: Good luck with your research!

Patron: Thank you so much

Patron: I think that is all the questions I have for today.

Librarian 1: Ok, then. Bye now.

Librarian 1: Librarian ended chat session.

Librarian 2: Your inquiry about the Twitter collection at the Library of Congress was forwarded to me. We appreciate your interest.

The Twitter collection has not been opened to researchers, and, at this time, no date has been set for the collection to be opened.

The Library has been working to index the collection and develop use policies. These processes and the resulting outcomes must balance the goal of having a useful collection with two realities – first, the size and dynamic nature of the Twitter platform, and second, the resource realities of a public institution.

If you are interested in learning more background about the collection and the processes for receiving and preserving tweets, the blog and white paper at this link provide some information: <http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2013/01/update-on-the-twitter-archive-at-the-library-of-congress/> <http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2013/01/update-on-the-twitter-archive-at-the-library-of-congress/> .

Thank you for expressing an interest in using the Library for your research and I regret we are unable to be of assistance with the particular project.

Sincerely,

Kristi Conkle, Senior Data Analyst  
Collection Development Office  
Library of Congress

**\*\*My Chat log with the Library of Congress and being denied Twitter access as the archive has not been made public yet.**

## Appendix B: IRB Exemption

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

**Study Number:** 1612E02541

**Principal Investigator:** Nicholas-Brie Guarriello

**Title(s):**

Pokémon Go Explore the World: Community Building & Affective Labor

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This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date. Please inform the IRB when you intend to close this study.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at [\(612\) 626-5654](tel:612-626-5654).

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central



at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We value your feedback. We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic, but your responses will provide us with insight regarding what we do well and areas that may need improvement. Thanks in advance for completing the survey. <http://tinyurl.com/exempt-survey>

**IRB Clearance of my research methods and design for this project. The title is different, but was noted that it was tentative**